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ISSUE 15

2009 PREVIEW

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Meet the team

» Ben Biggs
Ben's New Year's resolution: don't make a New Year's resolution this year. Unfortunately he's now gone and fried his brain on this paradox.
LOVING: 2008
WANTING: 2010

» Dan Howdle
Dan's managed to lose himself in Liberty City. No, seriously, we have no idea where the hell he is. He was last seen in Algonquin shooting a tramp's face off and chasing a whore.
LOVING: Shooting tramps
WANTING: A real gun

» Jimmy Hayes
This month Jimmy has been distracted by a whole host of iPhone games. Looks like MMOs could be heading that way!
LOVING: Games for Christmas
WANTING: More holidays

» April Madden
This month, April has been doing some severe fangirling over both *Aion* and *The Chronicles Of Spellborn*. We're going to start accusing her of gothic tendencies soon...
LOVING: *Aion*
WANTING: *Guild Wars 2* news

» Dan Collins
With an incredible amount of great games now out, Dan has decided that this would be the best time to get addicted to old *Family Fortunes* reruns. Fantastic.
LOVING: Turkey
WANTING: Turkey

» Andy Salter
Andy is still making his way around the Capital Wasteland, and his new favourite pastime is watching mobs fight. Seems a Deathclaw can kill two Giant Radscorpions, but not a Sentry Bot...
LOVING: *Fallout 3*... still!
WANTING: More time!

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» Welcome to the only magazine for next-generation PC gamers

Having just made myself incredibly sick on the latest batch of warm mince pies and cream (is there any other way to eat them?), I'm really quite looking forward to my stomach deflating before I explode like a *Left 4 Dead* Boomer. I'm also looking forward to a very healthy start to 2009, not just in the fitness regime my waistline dictates is essential, but in the wealth of incredible PC games coming our way in the New Year. To mark the occasion we've crammed an incredible 12 pages of this issue with 20 of the biggest, most exciting titles due to touch down during the year, including a couple that have spilled over from 2008.

> "We've crammed an incredible 12 pages with 20 of the biggest titles due to touch down during the year"

Other highlights from this issue include exclusive word that an *Overlord* sequel is coming, our take on Blizzard's hotly anticipated *WOW* expansion and a massive world exclusive on *Dragon Age: Origins* that reveals exactly how many origin stories we can expect, news of a naughty *Mass Effect* moment and – get this – we even caught BioWare hinting at a sequel. Feel free to dive straight over to page 38 to get the full lowdown.
Enjoy the issue!

Russell Barnes,
Editor

TOTAL PC Gaming
FOR NEXT-GEN PC GAMERS
2009 PREVIEW
GAMES
WRATH OF THE LICH KING
An epic review for the PC's most epic game!
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Total news

The month of PC gaming in essential news, images, opinion and analysis

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"One of the great things that have marked PC games is their tendency to lend themselves to modification"

Iain Simons, National Videogame Archive

Topic **Industry**

ONE LIFE LEFT

PC gamers are crucial to the saving of videogames, according to the bods behind the National Videogame Archive

The cry is stark: videogaming needs you. And while you may be sitting there thinking you play more games than most of the population has taken breaths, it's not quite enough. If gamers don't act now, according to one of the founders of the National Videogame Archive, Dr James Newman, then the games we have enjoyed to date may well be lost to future generations.

Dr Newman has set up the archive along with Iain Simons; both work at Nottingham Trent University and were the brains behind the recent GameCity festival held in the city. It was there that the Save The Videogame campaign was launched, and Dr Newman, from Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Contemporary Play, says the PC is vital in their efforts to keep a store of games preserved forever.

Do you want to find out more about the National Videogame Archive? Then you need to head to **www.savethevideogame.org**

"PC gaming has a particular resonance as it remains the most ubiquitous open platform," he told **Total PC Gaming**. "The kinds of work that can be found in the PC download market really define some of the extremities of what videogames can be. On a personal level, if *Spheres Of Chaos* isn't included, I'll resign forthwith. Additionally, the whole culture and practice of modding has transformed what games have become, and has been hugely responsible for making games malleable, reconfigurable things.

"For that reason alone, PC games are absolutely central to what we're interested in at the Archive because we want to chart the cultures of play and playfulness that surround and support gaming. While we might focus on the user-generated content of games like [Sony's PlayStation 3

"A key motivation for creating the NVA was that, with a few exceptions, you can't legitimately buy old games any more, and even when you can, they are often remade with new graphics and features"
Dr James Newman, National Videogame Archive

EMULATING THE GREATS

The PC has played a major role in archiving videogames already. Websites such as Mobygames have proved invaluable in creating databases in which key information and screens are stored, and the scores of emulators for various retro systems ensure that the classic games can be replayed again and again on the PC. This has helped keep key games in the spotlight and Dr James Newman has praised their efforts.

"The emulator scene is obviously associated with what we do, but it differs in some important ways also," he says. "Without doubt, the creation of emulators has kept alive the interest in old games that might otherwise have disappeared off the radar. One of our constant concerns and a key motivation for creating the NVA was that, with a few exceptions, you really can't legitimately buy old games any more, and even when you can, they are often remade and updated with new graphics or timings and updated features.

"Emulators are useful in concentrating our attentions back on the original artefact – the original code with all of its quirks, bugs, glitches and unforgiving Eighties gameplay. But we also want to look to the importance of original hardware and interfaces. With emulators, a modestly specced PC or Mac can easily become a multiplatform gaming device. However, playing SNES games with some crappy USB joystick from PC World is qualitatively different to playing with a SNES pad. The feel of the game comes through the pad just as it does through the screen and speakers."

title] *LittleBigPlanet*, we need to remember that this is not a new phenomenon."

Newman and Simons aim to archive not only the games but also the posters, boxes, magazines and merchandise that go alongside them. They also want to preserve memories – the thought processes that go into the design of games and, for that reason, they are interviewing scores of developers in a bid to ensure such vital information is retained. All of this will be placed on display at the National Media Museum in Bradford, and it could even tour the country – taking gaming to the masses.

"One of the great things that have marked PC games is their tendency to lend themselves to modification," says Simons. "Console titles are comparatively static in terms of what you can do with them other than play them, enter cheats and consult walkthroughs to explore the last drops of possibility in the game world. PC games, by contrast, open themselves up to being remade and played with in more direct and sometimes more drastic ways. From the earliest days of dumping a list of the program code and changing variables, to making use of the modding tolls that have become practically de rigueur. I have a strong personal interest in seeing the ways in which teams of gamers use these tools to remake the game – not just in terms of moving objects around or reskinning graphics, but inventing whole new games and experiences."

Although the past is being preserved, Newman and Simons are also looking to the future and ensuring videogames yet to be created will be placed in the museum to ensure they will remain safe. But both have expressed sadness that PC gaming is moving predominantly towards downloads nowadays.

"One of the tragedies of the download market is, of course, always going to be the death of packaging, and, more importantly, the packing materials used to ship with titles," says Simons. "While the download market clearly presents great opportunities for indie developers and established publishers alike, I can't help but feel pangs of sadness that we're not going to see the like of the Infocom boxes of goodies again. There was something so exciting about a game like *Elite* coming in a box just bulging with promise – posters, keyboard overlays, sci-fi novels – it's kind of sad that we're not going to get those things with titles any more. They really were a key part of defining what those games were."

Mini feed

GIVING GAMING A POKE

Fancy opening up your PC titles and editing the game data? The application, Poke, from developer Márton Anka, lets you do just that – and it has just been placed into the public domain, meaning you can now download and use it for free. It works by exploiting the RAM used to store temporary information. In games, this includes the little extras that make life fun – the amount of ammo in a weapon, for instance. Working like the old Multiface device on the Spectrum, the program pauses titles mid-game and allows the user to alter some of the game's values. These are then changed, giving you a bit of an advantage when you resume playing. You can't use it on online games, but check it out at **codefromthe70s.org/poke.asp**

NVIDIA'S NEW $3,500 GRAPHICS CARD

If you're after one hell of a gaming accessory for your PC and you have a couple of grand knocking about in your pocket, then Nvidia's new graphics card may be for you. The Nvidia Quadro FX5800 may be a bit of a mouthful, but you'll want to get your teeth into it should you have $3,500 to spare. It contains 4GB of onboard memory, a bandwidth of 102GB and will certainly deal with the top PC games around today, letting you play them as the developers wanted you to. According to the website, it's perfect for lots of non-gaming stuff too, "The Quadro FX5800 ultra-high-end solution gives geophysicists, designers, scientists, engineers and other technical professionals visual supercomputing from their desktops." We'll stick to a FPS, thank you.

HAVING MITTENS

We know the price of gas has been rocketing and it's absolutely freezing outside, but this idea seems a little bit ridiculous. It's a pair of USB-heated gaming gloves, perfect for those moments when the on-screen action is getting heated, but the temperature in the room just won't match. They're also great if you live in an igloo. Now we reckon most of our readers don't live in an igloo, but if you want to check these gloves out, you can do so at **www.videogame.brando.com.hk**. As an alternative, the local market will most likely have some nice woolly gloves for a quid, and they may even come with some cool Santa pics on them.

Mini feed

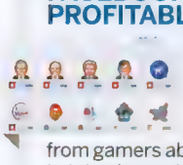
INDIECADE OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Indie gaming expert IndieCade will be open to fresh submissions from 15 January. Founder and president Stephanie Barish tells us she is on the lookout for passionate, quirky games that will be showcased across the world. In 2008, IndieCade visited China, Los Angeles, Seattle and Nottingham and previous games exclusively previewed by this respected organisation have included the much talked about *Braid*. As long as you don't have funding from a major publisher, you can feel free to head to **www.indiecade.com** and submit your game. The team is open to all ideas, whether they are browser-based, casual, puzzle, major PC blockbusters, mods or arty.

WEPC OR NOT PC?

A new website has been set up by Asus and Intel in a bid to design the world's first community-created PC. Both firms say the resulting machine will be built, and ideas are being invited for netbooks, notebooks and, of most interest to us, gaming notebooks. **WePC.com** says its aim is to 'enable a global conversation about the ideal elements of a PC.' According to Josh Mattison of Federated Media, which is involved in the marketing campaign, there is no limit to creativity, and so far there have been some interesting ideas. Among them is a waterproof laptop, ideal for those PC surfing sessions.

FACEBOOK BLOW FOR PROFITABLE GAMES



The developer of Facebook game *PackRat* has been stunned by the response from gamers about its decision to introduce micropayments. Shortly after the new system was introduced (it enables players to buy certain cards with real money rather than steal them from opponents in the spirit of the game) players began to leave one-star ratings. It follows vain attempts by developer Alamofire to make money out of click ads and, given the game's popularity prior to the alteration, it shows that casual game developers are likely to struggle when it comes to making a profit out of Facebook titles.

Topic **Industry**

PC WORLD AMENDS PRICE MATCH GUARANTEE

Major high street retailer drops online retailers from its list of rival stores

Remember the good old days when you could pop to Amazon.co.uk, find a discounted price, pop to PC World and not only get a price match, but a further 10 per cent of the difference? Well, those days are well and truly over after PC World owner DSG Retail decided to alter its price match guarantee.

The initiative is now called 'Price Promise Plus', and PC World no longer offers to price match goods found cheaper at **Amazon.co.uk**, Dabs, Dell, Evesham Technology, Misco and **Play.com**. Instead, it only offers the guarantee for goods found for less at Argos, Comet, Jessops, Tesco, John Lewis, Asda, B&Q, Game, Gamestation, Halfords, HMV, Maplin, Staples, Toys R Us, Zavvi and Woolworths. Currys offers to price match the same stores.

The changes to PC World's price match guarantee were implemented in the lead-up to Christmas. A worker at a store in Bolton, Greater Manchester, said posters advertising the old promise were taken down and that the larger overheads of retail stores meant it was more difficult for high street retailers to match internet and warehouse-based stores.

Furthermore, **Dixons.co.uk**, which is owned by the same company, says it seeks to compare prices with rivals to ensure its prices are the lowest, but it doesn't appear to include any dedicated online sellers, either. While the website itself doesn't list the companies it checks against, its Google search entry states that they are Comet, Tesco, Sainsbury's PCWorld, John Lewis, Carphone Warehouse and Argos.

A spokesman for DSG Retail told **TPCG**: "Neither Currys nor PC World are pure play operators. They are multi-channel retailers offering customers value, choice and service both in our stores and on our websites.

"Operating a large portfolio of stores results in higher overheads than pure play operators, so our policy is to offer our customers a huge range of electrical products at value-for-money prices, experienced and well-trained staff to advise them, after-sales services and the opportunity to buy either from our stores or our websites, depending on the customers' preference. Our pricing policy reflects the market we operate in."

LIVING WITH THE COMMUNITY

David Braben reckons user-generated content will provide a bright future for PC gaming

Topic **Industry**

Building communities around videogames and encouraging user-generated content will enable the PC to thrive as a gaming platform, according to industry legend David Braben.

The creator of *Elite*, who has gone on to found Frontier Developments, has told **Total PC Gaming** that piracy continues to be a major problem. But he says that by encouraging people to produce their own content for games, the sense of ownership will rise and it will make gamers less inclined to download titles illegally.

"Just getting a community feel around a game is beneficial," says Braben. "This is why online has become crucial, and done right, I think it could counter the threat of piracy and also lessen the need for DRM, which, let's face it, nobody likes."

However, he says the effort needed to produce a PC game does not always make it viable. "*Thrillville: Off the Rails* is a good example of the difference between the PC and consoles," he says. "On the PC we sold tens of thousands, but on console we sold millions. And I think when you're faced with a choice of a PC game and a console game, the average gamer is going to go for console. You know the game is going to work."

He says the evolution of PC technology can be a problem, too. "Writing a good PC game is hard because the Q&A is so complex," adds Braben. "We still have bug problems with *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* now. That's not because of the game, but because graphic card companies withdraw their early driver support and it has an effect on the running of the games. These things are a pain – it's often like supporting ten different platforms. But there's still a market there that just can't be ignored."

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TEN MINES OF MORIA COMPILATIONS TO BE WON!

Tolkien may be long dead, but the world of Middle-earth is expanding – the virtual world of Middle-earth, at least. With the first retail expansion of Turbine's hugely popular MMO, *Lord Of The Rings Online*, dwarves, elves, men and hobbits will be able to explore the former mountain kingdom of Durin, otherwise known as Moria. Infested with the evil of Sauron, it's now home to hordes of his minions, the Watcher and the infernal Balrog.

We're giving away ten *LOTRO* compilation packs, courtesy of Codemasters Online. Each pack includes the original game, *Mines Of Moria* expansion, a 30-day subscription and two in-game items to choose from.

To be in with a chance of winning, go to www.trylotro.com, check out the free trial and tell us how many days you can play for free.

Send your answers to tpcg@imagine-publishing.co.uk with 'Moria competition' in the subject header. Closing date is 22 January 2009.

Competition rules 1. All entries must be received by 22 January 2009. 2. There is no cash alternative. 3. The publisher's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into. 4. No employees of Imagine Publishing Ltd or any company with products on offer within this competition is eligible to enter. 5. Only one entry per person per competition. 6. By entering, competitors agree to be bound by the rules and requirements of the competition. 7. You may be sent news about products and opportunities from related companies. If you do not wish to receive such information, please state as such on your entry.

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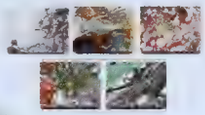

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Paul Wedgwood

CAUSING A SPLASH FROM FRAGS TO RICHES

He used to play truant from school, but now he's hugely successful, Paul Wedgwood is giving advice to students

Paul Wedgwood is running late. The mobile phone on the table in the darkened surroundings of Nottingham's Gatecrasher nightclub lights up a corner of the room every now and then, giving us status updates on Paul's journey north. "Oh no," comes a cry. "It looks like he's stuck in traffic."

If the only reason for his journey was to talk to **Total PC Gaming** then all would be fine. Beers could be put on ice. Only he is due to appear before a hundred or so people to discuss the phenomenal rise of his company Splash Damage, and it is this that is causing the panic. Meanwhile, all Paul can do is sit in his car and wait.

While thumbs are twiddled, a light-hearted warning is given. "Paul talks a lot," we are told. "He's passionate about his subject, and when he starts, he barely pauses for breath. So jump in where you can. He won't be offended."

It's been a busy time for Paul, having hosted a couple of game design sessions and doled out career advice to students at the London Games Festival and now this – his Nottingham gig – the culmination of a week of chat. Yet when Wedgwood does arrive, making his apologies and going on to give an entertaining insight into his firm's work, he doesn't appear at all jaded. "Are you tired," we ask afterwards? "Not at all," he smiles, and there's no doubting he's in good humour. Perhaps a good time to pop the question: what game is Splash Damage working on with Bethesda Softworks?

"It's a multi-platform game. It's coming out on the PC, the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. That's the aim, anyway," he answers. "It's going to be a new, original game, not a sequel or a licence of a movie or anything like that." And the game's name? "We can't say." The genre? "Sorry, we're not announcing even that yet."

The deal with Bethesda was announced on 22 May 2008 and, since then, Splash Damage has been hard at work, preparing not just the game, but gathering together some considerable talent. "Bethesda is a company that has an emphasis on quality," says Wedgwood. "We wanted a publisher that puts out four or five good games a year rather than one that launches 60 titles, most of which are rubbish with a handful of pearls."

The London-based independently owned developer, which launched in 2001, is already massively successful, having worked on *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. But Wedgwood says it's time to push the boundaries further and so in comes Dean Calver from Ninja Theory, along with fellow *Heavenly Sword* alum Mark Lack as senior environment artist. Joining them are Fabio '*Black* and *Harry Potter*' Bonvicini as animation technical director, *World In Conflict* designer Mattias Engström as senior technical designer, and Oliver '*Mass Effect* and *TimeSplitters 2*' Jauncey as senior programmer.

"We've gone on this big recruitment drive with the aim of doubling the size of the company," Wedgwood explains. "The people we're taking on have big track records, but that's not to say we won't be recruiting from the community. Where we see some great levels being created, we'll look to bring the people responsible on board."

Those people are starting at a company that claims to look after its workers. The title of Wedgewood's talk at GameCity was From Frags to Riches, but even at its very early and poorer stage, the company believed in sharing the spoils of its endeavours. "Our head office was above a pub, but we still paid people more than what they would have received at an America studio, and we even threw in healthcare. I believe that you have to treat people well, and I think some independent studios struggle because they just take what they can get and don't see the benefit of building a good team with a track record and then rewarding them properly."

At first, Splash Damage produced free mods like *Quake 3 Fortress*. At the time, the staff were also working with Now TV and *Gamer. tv*, producing and presenting television shows, but as the mods became increasingly more successful and respected they began to partner with publishers.

They worked with Games Domain in 2002, producing a map for id Software's *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*. Activision and id asked Splash Damage to produce multiplayer maps for the *Return To Castle Wolfenstein Game Of The Year Edition*. They also created all of the maps for *Doom 3*'s multiplayer mode.

"What we've always done is go after talented people and that's the key," says Wedgwood. "We don't worry about qualifications – it's all about what they have to offer. Having said that, we're seeing a solid university drive for accreditation by Skillset, and we're seeing some good centres of excellence. If students can produce a good portfolio, we'll take a look."

Wedgwood says the PC will remain Splash Damage's main focus, despite the foray into Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 territory. Paul says they are 'experimenting' with consoles, but they won't lose sight of the platform that made the company's name. "We're not one of those developers that just port games here, there and everywhere – a PSP port of something just because it's on the table," he says. "We've taken a careful path, received help and advice and it's helped us to become a triple-A developer. But we're at a stage where we should be looking at consoles and how best to produce games for them. In some ways, the Xbox 360 is the easier of the two console platforms because you can plug an Xbox 360 controller into a PC and play long before the Microsoft version is complete."

Paul Wedgwood on... **starting a developer**

"I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit and I was passionate for gaming. But I didn't start Splash Damage to make money. It was a bonus that it has"

» Return To Castle Wolfenstein Game Of The Year Edition 2002

» Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory 2003

» Doom 3 2004

» Enemy Territory: Quake Wars 2007

For Paul, Splash Damage is a culmination of a lifetime of gaming. He would play truant from school just so he could grab a Spectrum magazine and laboriously type in the streams of code such publications filled many of its pages with. It led him to being expelled, but it didn't diminish his obsession with gaming. In many ways, it freed up his time to play around even more. And the lack of dedication to his school work hasn't done him any harm at all. The beaming smile he wears behind his goatee beard shows a man content with what he has achieved. Or, more to the point, the many possibilities for the future.

So will that future include the PC? "Absolutely. There are 8 million *World Of Warcraft* subscriptions so doesn't that say it all?" he grins. "But it depends on what you want to make – for some things the PC is perfect, *Solitaire* or *Bejewelled*, that sort of thing – and for other things, you may not want that mouse and keyboard control and want your games to be comfortably played sitting on a sofa with a plasma television. The challenge is retaining attention with PC games, and it's perhaps true to say that developers who concentrate on the PC need to look at consoles too, hence our reason for going multi-platform."

Whatever happens, online will play a major role for Splash Damage. From the moment Wedgwood played *Quake*, he was hooked on the competitive nature. Of the earlier games, *Team Fortress* was the one that grabbed him. He formed a clan, became involved in the community feel and got his break commentating on *Quake* matches televised on Now TV.

"Gaming is as exciting now as it always was for me," he says. "Talking to students about getting into the industry is a world away from being in soulless comms room in the city, something I did day after day before Splash Damage. I've been to LAN parties, I've seen how social gaming has taken off. Being part of that is just amazing."

David Crookes

Paul Wedgwood on... **modders**

"Most of the people we employed – initially at least – worked on mods and so created a stunning portfolio"

The Next Frontier

» TBA (2009?): So far Splash Damage has been a multi-award-winning developer, and we don't expect anything less than superb from its long-term partnership with Bethesda Softworks. Judging by its website, Splash Damage appears to have loved *Fallout 3*, so any inspiration they gain from that pearl won't be wasted, no matter what the next project is going to be.

Out now» Enemy Territory: Quake Wars It was this stunning FPS that helped bring Splash Damage to Bethesda's attention, created using a modded version of id Software's *Doom* engine with MegaTexture rendering technology. It rapidly won many fans, hooked on the multiplayer focus.

Due in 2009» Unannounced project That unannounced project. Something absolutely brand, spanking new from the minds of the marvellous modders. If that doesn't whet your appetite...

Kelly Wand

Arbitrary Glossolalia #15:

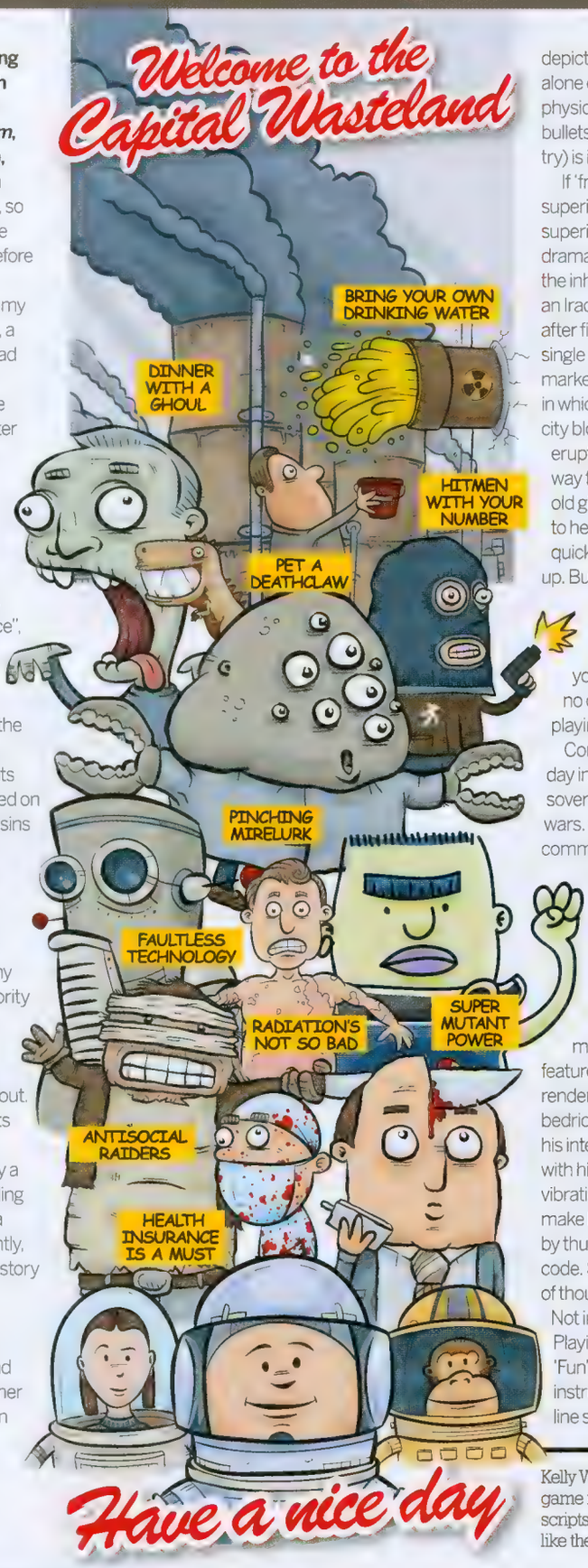
Fallout 3 and the chaotic neutral role of role-playing in interactive entertainment

Though I cringe at the thought of reviving ye olde 'are games art?' debate (which found new legs following non-gamer Roger Ebert's review of the 2005 non-movie *Doom*, a poor example of pretty much everything), playing *Fallout 3* renewed my introspection on the issue. I have to get a little spoiler-y here, so those who haven't done so, go play through the entire game and choose every permutation before reading further. Done? Cool.

The sequence of game events that spurred my epiphany was this: in the township of Megaton, a settlement built around an unexploded warhead worshipped by old people curiously immune to radiation sickness (or perhaps young people made old from radiation sickness), my character encountered a seedy, suited button man type in the local tavern who tried to recruit me into setting off the bomb and killing hundreds of innocents (or at least tens of glassy-eyed NPCs). I decided to do the 'right' thing and rat him out to the competent, tough, leathery-skinned sheriff, who, upon promising me I was about to see a prime example of "frontier justice", raced back to the dingy watering-hole and informed the hood that he was under arrest for conspiring to set off bombs. Then the gangster shot the sheriff dead (a contingency the latter failed to foresee). In the back. Orphaning his young son and leaving the town's inhabitants defenceless. On top of that, a bounty was placed on my head, leaving me to periodically face assassins at random locations and times forevermore. In short, I'd made things worse for myself and everyone by being good. I hadn't even got any XP. A classic study in moral ambiguity and the randomness of human behaviour, permanent ripples in the game-world caused entirely by my momentary impulse to trust a seasoned authority figure. Part of its effectiveness was the shock value; the sheriff had not been set up as careless. The only flaw, perhaps, was that the other NPCs in the bar ignored the whole shootout.

The refrain among games-as-art proponents is that the interactive element alone is what makes games superior. By this iffy logic, to play a scruffy Raskolnikov is innately superior to reading Dostoyevsky. But what games offer is at best a very limited freedom of choice. More importantly, freedom of choice has its place, and not every story is best told in second-person.

There's also the fact that, like comic books (outside of Japan), games are relegated to the status of juvenilia by pretty much everyone, and as such are doomed by corporate and consumer timidity to rehash unremarkable science-fiction settings more suited to Saturday morning cartoons than bookshelves. Even as the visual and auditory technology grows ever more cutting-edge, it's all put at the service of sanitised mediocrity. Any medium unable to depict sophisticated sexual relationships, let alone cigarette smoking, nuanced dialogue or physiologically accurate effects of grenades and bullets on human viscera (not that Fallout doesn't try) is impossible to take seriously as art.



If 'freedom of choice' alone makes games superior, then RPGs are by extension the most superior. But this only holds up if the choices are dramatically effective, which is where you run into the inherent narrative limitations of games. Imagine an Iraq War-themed shooter (and note too that after five years of the conflict there has yet to be a single one produced, even though most games are marketed as topical, realistic military simulations) in which you play a US Marine patrolling a crowded city block in Baghdad. Suddenly a commotion erupts. Pedestrians all around you scatter, making way for an oncoming emblem of horror: a six-year old girl, running right at you, with a bomb strapped to her chest. To survive you have to shoot her quickly, or she'll get close enough to blow you up. But shoot her prematurely, and she takes out the few dozen pedestrians still trying to evacuate her vicinity (or were they in on it?). You have only seconds to react. Of course you kill her so the game can proceed. You have no choice. But without choice, are you even playing a game?

Compare such an incident to your average day in Stormwind or Orgrimmar, capital cities of sovereign nations supposedly locked in bitter racial wars. Of course, the focus of *WOW* isn't war but commerce and fashion (or as one female player put it, "I only kill when it's pretty"), and that's fine. Not every game needs to be a profound meditation on the human condition. The question is, can games only tell materialistic success stories? And if so, doesn't that make them the least expressive medium?

Form follows function. Dalton Trumbo's moving, brutal novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, features a narrator who is a World War I veteran rendered legless, armless, blind, deaf, mute and bedridden. The entire book is related entirely from his internal perspective of memories intercut with his frenzied attempts to reckon time by the vibrations of footfalls and closing doors and to make himself understood to his oblivious nurses by thumping his head against his pillow in Morse code. Since much of the narrative consists largely of thoughts, the story wouldn't work as a movie. Not in the same way, anyway. But as a game? Playing as a character reduced to one sense? 'Fun', maybe not, but it would undoubtedly be instructive. Ultimately art's all about drawing the line somewhere.

Kelly Wand is the author of numerous award-winning* game reviews, columns, short stories, plays and scripts. He's based in LA but considers its weather, like the Wii, overrated. *Except for the 'award' part

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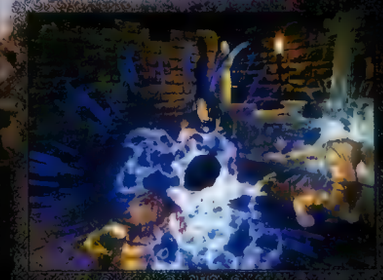

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HAVE YOUR SAY

Answered by
Russell Barnes
Russell is currently enjoying Christmas with his lovely lady in the wilds of Hampshire next door to Mr Cadbury (yes, the Mr Cadbury of chocolate fame), but he'll still be itching to play *Left 4 Dead* when he returns to Bournemouth...

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Merry Christmas to one and all! Or is it? If you're dissatisfied with that DRM stuffed in your stocking or feel the need to vent at the poorness of your latest console port, you know where to come...

TPCG Podcast 05
Listen to our topic du jour: What are the **Total PC Gaming** team's favourite games of 2008?

The F word

Dear **TPCG**,
I have just got the last couple of copies of your magazine and wanted to congratulate you on what I think is, for the most part, a very commendable read. I used to be an avid *PC Gamer* reader, but have found that title to have become wearisome in recent months and have turned to your magazine as an interesting alternative. So far I've been really impressed with the layout and content, especially the MMO section. I find the reviews detailed and interesting and overall there is little to fault with the magazine. However, one thing that makes me stop reading a review quicker than blinking is unwarranted use of bad language.

I've been gaming for nigh-on 35 years now (I'm 42), and have always sought out decent magazines to complement those platforms. I purchase and read gaming magazines that give fair reviews on finished game code, have articles that inform and entertain as well as making me think. Even from the early days of *Amiga Power* (yes, I still have issue 0), which was a revelation in the days when nearly all games magazines would give every game at least 80 per cent and most reviewed unfinished code, I just found the bad language a real disappointment, and I stuck with that magazine as it was the only one with the guts to tell it like it was regarding games, and the use of the 'c' word (the one with the 'p' at the end) gradually subsided over time.

Over the past year or so, *PC Gamer* has tried to be more '*FHM*' with its use of bad language, the first review with the F word in just made me shake my head and laugh. I believe it was a review of a *C&C* release and the writer tried to justify the use of the language because he was explaining how bad war was. I just saw it for what it was, pretentious, 'look at me – I've got something to say so listen' writing with the bad language so out of place in a game review especially as so many people have described the horrors of war far more expressively in literature without having to swear.

Let me now frame how I felt about it reading the *F.E.A.R. 2* preview in your magazine. I started reading it and enjoyed the style, turned the page and then the review just completely lost it with a puerile use of bad language in just two sentences. Such a shame because it had really been a good read until then, but then it just ruined it for me. I'm no prude about language in life (I do read *FHM* and *Maxim* on occasion – the language used there is appropriate for their target demographic), but I don't expect to see bad language in games magazines as I believe it adds absolutely nothing and takes so much away from what seems to be in your case, well-written and intelligent reviews. Those sentences could have been written with no bad language and achieved much more, with a little thought.

To sum up in a games term analogy, what I want from a magazine is the clever, witty and enormously entertaining features of *WOW* written in a style for the subscriber base of *EverQuest*.

And finally, Esther... (one thing I learnt from 'One-minute Management' always give them a 'stroke' after placing a 'negative') I really do think your magazine is the best thing out there at the moment; just keep up the good work (sans swearing).

Gary Short, via email

The giveaway
With the 64-bit iteration of Vista finding its way onto most gamers PCs the demand for 4GB of high quality RAM has never been so high. That's why we offer 4GB of Corsair Twin 2X4096 64005DHX to one lucky reader every month.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Steaming load

In all fairness I love Steam. It has an increasing selection of games and the prices are good when they are first released. But they do not adjust the prices! I mean, really – $69.99 for *Call Of Duty 4*? $54.99 for *BioShock*? I can go down to my local retailer and get those games for under half of the price. Steam is good, but if it still wants to sell the old games in the future it needs to be more up to date. How is the PC market going survive if in 30 years time there are no PC games in retailers and a copy of *Call Of Duty 4* costs $69.99? The people over at Valve have been working on Steam for over six years and they still don't adjust the prices? Why is that? Would you pay $54.99 for *BioShock* on Steam or go to a local retailer and get it for under half that price?

Eoghan O'Connell, email

The key problem here, Eoghan, is that people in the States seem happy to pay these prices. We'd be more inclined to agree if it weren't for the many examples of slow-selling games dropping in price or being promoted. This being the case we're quite satisfied that Valve is on top of its game – ultimately if people keep buying, Valve will keep offering them at these seemingly high prices. For those of you not satisfied, the best thing you can do is start voting with your wallet.

"The first review I saw with the F word in just made me shake my head and laugh!"

TOTAL PC Gaming REVIEWS RETRO HARDWARE MODS FOR NEXT-GEN PC GAMERS
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Best of 2008 Topics

Return of the king

Without a doubt, *Crysis Warhead*, for wars mainly. I liked *PES 2009* and *Far Cry 2* was good but way too hyped. *Grid* was amazing, but *Spore* was okay at best.

Gee

The sound of music

So far, the only PC game that has meant anything to me in 2008 is *Audiosurf*. The game isn't that great in itself, but it's so simple and the genius is in allowing you to rediscover things you'd left behind.

hahnchen

A far cry from the top

Far Cry 2, *Dead Space* and undoubtedly *Fallout 3* and *Red Alert 3*. They're my top games of 2008. Also, *Spore* is amazing, but I wouldn't put it as a top game.

zero1979

Starters orders

The game I am spending most of my time on this year (that was released in 2008) is *Warhammer Online*. However, I wouldn't call it best game of the year. That's a hard one to decide, and if I was pressed to pick a title out of the ones released so far, it would probably be *Grid*. Haven't played enough of *Far Cry 2* yet to say if it is better overall or not.

TheFlyingScotsman

Spore-ting chance

Spore was amazing until I got to the Tribal stage. It had a different feel to that section and it's one that I think I might skip when I next play it – if I do...

Shellei

Polls

Vote online!

Which is your fanourite online games portal right now. Our money goes to nowgamer.com, but maybe we're biased! Vote on our forum now...
www.totalpcgaming.com/forum

TPCG: Thanks for the constructive criticism and the 'stroke' at the end, Gary – always appreciated. We try to keep the bad language to a minimum for many of the reasons you mention in your letter, but we don't like to tie our writers up in knots with too many regulations. We're lucky enough to have a very wide and varied readership on Total PC Gaming, so it's very hard to keep everyone happy all of the time. We've taken your comments on board and it would be interesting to hear what others have to say on the matter.

Mismanaged merger?

Dear TPCG,

The first round of *Warhammer Online* server mergers in Europe is upon us. Nicely enough, GOA has decided (quite rightly) that the under-populated servers should transfer their characters to medium-populated servers. However, with only 2 RP servers and 2 RP-RvR servers, the current policy of not transferring between server rule sets is upsetting a lot of people.

My case is similar to many others – my main characters are Destruction on Makaisson, one of the under-populated servers for the chop. They expect us to transfer to the other RP server, Burlock. However, despite this being pointed out several times, many of us have characters from the opposite side on Burlock. In my case, one of the largest and most influential guilds. The same problem is affecting those on the RP-RvR servers.

Essentially, I can either transfer my Destruction characters to Burlock and therefore delete my Order characters there, one of which has an important role in running the Order side of the guild, or I can just leave my characters to rot and wait the eventual pulling of the Makaisson plug. And I am not alone.

The only solution is to start afresh on the only other RP server, which, due to the way the servers are being purged, is an open RvR server – not my first choice.

Either way, I lose. So I'd like to give a big thumbs down to GOA/Mythic for not being more flexible in the transfer of characters – allowing those from low-population servers (and I mean really low-population) to move to a different server rule set would have meant that we could all have kept our characters from both sides. Currently, we're being asked to axe one set of characters (either Order or Destruction) and sever our ties with friends and guild-mates.

I appreciate that the low-pop server characters need to bolster the medium-pop servers and this will result in a better game experience for us all. However, reducing the amount of RP servers from two to one (same for RP-RvR servers) means most of those players will lose some of their characters.

Apologies if this is all a bit disjointed, but GOA/Mythic have just effectively given me a kick in the knackers – especially as I've just taken out a three-month subscription.
Aircool, via forum

TPCG: At the time of going to press we were still waiting for an official response from GOA to your problem, Aircool. We'll keep you posted on its response just as soon as it comes. It's in the company's best interest to keep its most hardened fans happy, and unless there's a very good technical reason for imposing these seemingly crazy limitations we're pretty sure it'll do the right thing in time.

Loose change

When you don't win, you lose. When something goes missing, you lose it. You can be loose, a knot can be loose, your mother can be loose, but you cannot 'loose'. So just in case you didn't understand that 'help section of the Game website' - you cannot loose your reward card.
Aircool

False pretences

I recently bought *Far Cry 2* online. I do not have an Internet connection at home, so was careful to check the specs before I bought. After installing the game I was told I would have to connect ot the Internet before I could play. I was not amused. There was nothing on the box stating this and surely this is misrepresentation of requirements to play the game. This for me is shameful, I bought the game under false pretences.
Doug Scott

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Resident blog-meister Ben 'Biggles' Biggs shares some more *Dragon Age: Origins* gossip. Oh no he didn't!

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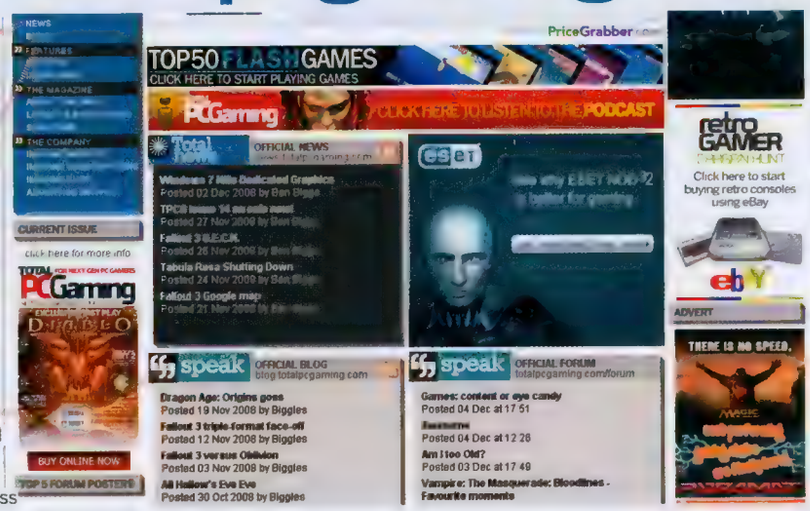

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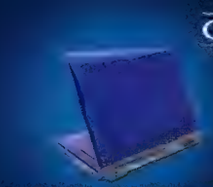

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2009 PREVIEW

2009

20 GAMES SET TO DOMINATE THE YEAR

IF YOU THOUGHT 2008 WAS GOOD, JUST LOOK AT WHAT'S IN STORE OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS. DAVID CROOKES TAKES A LOOK AT THE CREAM OF A VERY LARGE CROP

2009 PREVIEW

...IS SET TO DOMINATE THE YEAR

A few months ago, a crystal ball appeared in the office. No kidding. It was sent in by PopCap, purveyors of all games casual, in a bid to encourage us to write about their latest game. We forget what it was called. And you know what? It doesn't work. We looked deep into it, caressed its smooth, glassy exterior in the hope that it would tell us all about the lovely games on their way in 2009. In exchange, we merely got our reflections.

So we started to do some research, and when we finally came up with a list of hot titles heading our way over the coming 12 months, we looked at it, eyes wide open, and realised how lucky we are. Not only are some big franchises bounding their way to the PC, but there's a whole raft of exclusives, too. Fine, so *The Sims 3* may not be to everyone's taste, but consider *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMO, *Starcraft II*, *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*... need we go on? Why, even *Braid* – the modern day, 2D puzzle classic that is entertaining the masses on Xbox Live Arcade – is to be enjoyed by PC gamers. It truly is a wonderful time.

HEADS-UP EXPLAINED!

ANTICIPATION

A quick-reference guide to quite how excited we are at the prospect of the game in question.

UPGRADE

Here we gauge how technically demanding we think a game will be and the odds that you'll want to upgrade.

COMPLETE

Charting quite how far along the respective team's game is in development.

E.T.A

The estimated time of arrival based on up-to-date publisher information.

E.T.A TBA 2009

DEUS EX 3

Developer Eidos Montreal **Publisher** Eidos Montreal
Website www.deusex3.com

It is 2027. Well, it isn't just yet, but when you play *Deus Ex 3* it will be, and therein lies a clue as to the setting of this third instalment in Eidos' role-playing game series. As is the case with many franchises nowadays, everyone's favourite RPG-shooter will come in the form of a prequel to the debut title and it will cast the player as everyday man Adam Jenson.

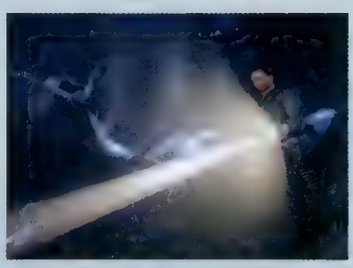
Our hero is a private security officer at Sarif, a biotech company raided by a gang of bad guys who ruthlessly slaughter his colleagues in a mass bloodbath, leaving Jenson confused and determined to not only find out the reason for the killing, but on a mission to avenge their deaths.

With a gorgeous cyberpunk style reminiscent of *Blade Runner* and the blessing of the original *Deus Ex* designers, Warren Spector and Harvey Smith, *Deus Ex 3* will look to rectify the 'mistakes' of the second title. Gameplay, for a start, will last longer and players won't be limited to single ammunition types. Kills will rely on your own skill rather than on statistics. And if you get hit, then given a small amount of time, you will automatically heal.

The game, which is still very much a work in progress, will also boast a greater number of augmentations – in fact, there will be 20 of the biomechanical variety – and for all the talk of the series being dumbed down following the promise that this third game will appeal to newbies as much as the core *Deus Ex* fans, Eidos Montreal has been at pains to suggest the game will be complex and multi-layered.

At the same time, it will be packed with memorable moments, according to the developer, and, even though *Deus Ex* and *Deus Ex: Invisible War* have already shown what happens after this forthcoming prequel, the third game will still have multiple endings that will depend on what the player has chosen to do during the game. "Everything will make sense to players of the two current games," says lead designer Jean-Francois Dugas, who has gone some to admitting that players won't have entirely free choice.

If there is any game players are eagerly awaiting, it is this – the first having been named numerous times as one of the best ever made. Feast your eyes on these exclusive screenshots and then pray it arrives in 2009.



ALAN WAKE

- **Developer** Remedy Entertainment
- **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios
- **Website** www.alanwake.com
- **Release date** TBC

A part of us thought that this psychological, *Silent Hill*-esque action thriller was going to be canned, as it was originally announced back in 2005, and we included it in our 2008 preview a whole year ago.

Delays and silence followed until October, when a brand new trailer emerged at the premiere of the *Max Payne* movie in Finland. And while there's still no release date, at least interest in the title has been reawoken, so to speak.

"We're going to keep quiet about the development of the game and we won't be putting out regular updates," Remedy boss Mika Reini says. "If everything had gone smoothly, the game would be out now, but we are working hard to ensure it exceeds expectation."

WOLFENSTEIN

- **Developer** Raven Software/id Software
- **Publisher** Activision Blizzard
- **Website** www.wolfenstein.com
- **Release date** TBC

It's been seven years since we played *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*, but 2009 will see the franchise reborn, with *Quake 4* devs Raven Software again brought on board by id Software to produce this Nazi-inspired sci-fi FPS. We're promised secret treasure and intense combat set in the fictional Germany city of Isenstadt in 1943, in the midst of the Second World War. Special agent B.J. Blazkowicz is called upon to fight against the Germans' plan for a new weapon of mass destruction using World War II weapons such as tommy guns and, of course, his flamethrower. Online, we can look forward to team and class-based battles.

F.E.A.R. 2: PROJECT ORIGIN

- **Developer** Monolith Productions
- **Publisher** Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
- **Website** projectorigin.warnerbros.com

The sequel to *F.E.A.R.* will be both old and new. Old in the sense that it will be continuing from where its predecessor left off, and new because of the greater shift in direction towards action. Think of it as *Kill Bill*. In reverse. With lots of Japanese horror movie inspiration to boot.

Now, Total PC Gaming has not been shy of delving deep into this game, and what we have seen has thrilled and surprised us. The sequel is set in a city-scaled environment rather than in a series of tight interiors, and this alters the pace of the game.

What you get is a deeper, psychological offering that begins a good half-hour before the end of the debut title and sees a return of some of the best known features, including slow-motion. In the sequel, psychic Alma has been released, and the player takes on the role of Michael Becket in order to stop her. During the course of the game, we learn more about Armacham, the company that created Alma, and we also discover that Alma can change Becket's world, cranking up the terror around him.

Even better, there's also an opportunity to take combat to the next level. "The player is constantly on their toes," explains Dave Matthews, the game's primary art lead. "But there's a chance to really fight back in *F.E.A.R. 2* – the opportunity to climb inside the Elite Powered Armor. It's really empowering." Oh, and you can download this from Steam and Direct2Drive from day one of launch.

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

Developer Creative Assembly **Publisher** Sega
Website www.sega.co.uk/empire

E.T.A FEB 2009

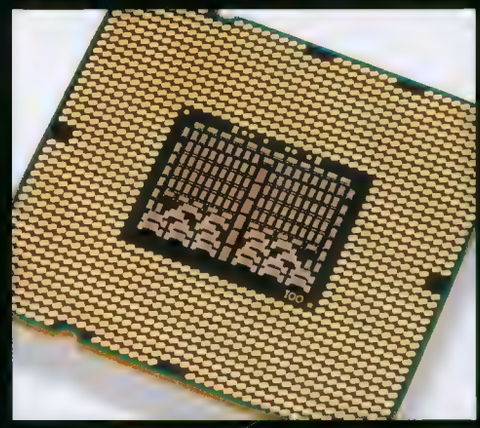
How important is *Empire: Total War*? Hey, we're kidding. Even asking that question is pretty dumb, we admit, because this is a game that has been pencilled in the diaries of PC gamers for a long time, and now we're just a couple of months away from seeing all of its turn-based, real-time strategy glory.

As the fifth game in the *Total War* series and one that was announced back in August 2007, the franchise has oozed mass market appeal, the element of *Sid Meier's Civilization* fused with huge tactic-led battles proving simply irresistible. This time around, we're expecting something different. After all, *Shogun: Total War* was released back in 2000, so a bit of freshening up is always a good thing.

And so we see 18th Century naval battles played out on a battle map rather than on the campaign map. Upping the visual ante somewhat, this means we're soon going to be commanding ships, checking wind conditions, monitoring wave heights and looking out incoming fire as we sail the seas, ready for attack. On land, players will be able to engage in longer-range battles rather than just the up-close-and-personal combat of previous games.

Just as importantly, gamers can get involved in the story-driven, three-chapter, goal-focused campaign mode – the Road to Independence, which centres around the American Revolutionary War and removes a lot of micromanagement.

Creative Assembly's communications manager Kieran Brigden says, "It's a nice way to introduce *Total War* novices to the games. Having this story element, offers something new for the veteran players, too."



INTEL

They say that big ships are very hard to turn around, but Intel has transformed from a backward sloth (with the Pentium 4 and NetBurst achitecture) into a lean cougar with the advent of Core 2 Duo and Core i7 in just 18 months. Its next move will be an assault on the graphics market and a new CPU architecture in 2010.

DIRECTX 11

The good news is Microsoft's forthcoming graphics API update won't be tied to Windows 7 like DirectX 10 is to Vista; it will be compatible with both. That said, DX11 won't work with XP so an upgrade is still necessary. Little is currently known of the graphical implications as yet.

WINDOWS 7

The more cynical among us currently consider Microsoft's latest OS to be little more than Vista 1.5. While MS have been slowly dribbling details of some of its back-end features it hasn't revealed its gaming features beyond DX 11. Expect Windows 7 to touch down in the second half of 2009.

NVIDIA

Nvidia's march into 2009 is off with a bang with the news that some of the world's biggest games publishers are backing the company's newly aquired PhysX physics technology and are currently beavering away on implementing it into the 2009 games line-up. We've got high hopes for its new technology.

AMD/ATI

AMD's assault of the graphics market in 2008 was nothing short of breathtaking. Its latest range has really thown a spanner in Nvidia's works. The company starts 2009 with some new performance fixes for its drivers and the promise to shake up the CPU/GPU business with Fusion in 2010.

VIEWS FROM THE FORUM

So far, I have seen barely anything to even whet my anticipation for next year. I fully expect to be playing my usual mix of games (*DOD 1.3*, *COD 4*, *Monkey Island 3*) until about June. Then *Fallout 3* will have fallen to a low enough price to buy, and so I will play that for a few weeks/months until *Mirror's Edge* becomes cheap enough.
➔ edibles_temp

Starcraft II, because I've been waiting for the game to come out since 1998. I remember yelling "No!" at my monitor as it faded to black, as an overwhelming fleet of evil Zerg closed in on the retreating United Earth Directorate forces. How could they leave the story hanging like that? (You thought *Halo 2*'s ending was bad?) I need to know the next piece of the story!
➔ jezcentral

I'm looking forward to Codemasters' *F1* game. It has been far too long since we had an *F1* game on the PC. The scum that is Sony has been pinching it for bloody years. I want and need to play online 20-player F1 racing! Just hope that they have 20 cars and let you set up a race season online.
➔ markopoloman

ALPHA PROTOCOL

E.T.A MAR 2009

Developer Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher** Sega
Website www.sega.com/alphaprotocol

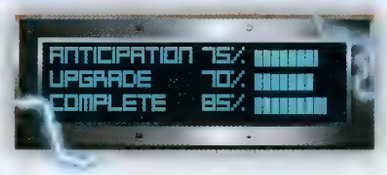
With all of the hype surrounding the recent James Bond epic, *Quantum Of Solace*, you'd think we'd have had enough of spy-based offerings by now. But developer Obsidian is billing *Alpha Protocol*'s main character – rookie CIA field agent Michael Thornton – as part Bond, part Bourne and part Bauer, and as long as it shakes and stirs the genre and doesn't end up as a clichéd, unpalatable cocktail, then it could well prove to be a 2009 highlight.

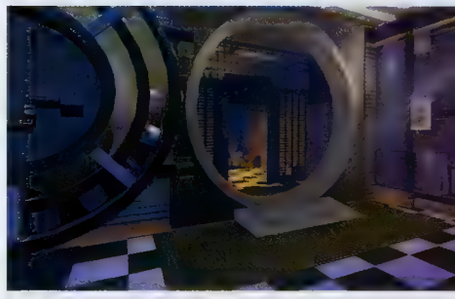
With a wealth of gadgets at your disposal and a story that producer Tim Ernst says is more involving than an entire series of *24*, you'll soon get stuck in. It's an investigation starting in the Middle East into the shooting down of a US passenger jet, and during the course of your probing, you'll have to make numerous decisions: should you use stealth or run straight at the enemy in dangerous situations, which weapon is best to get you out of a dodgy situation, do you act suave, professional or aggressive towards NPCs?

Certainly, conversation is important. "Conversations are in real-time," explains Ernst. "That creates tension. It's within the dialogues that a lot of decisions are made. We have an illegal arms dealer at one point, but do you arrest him, extort him for money or shoot him. It's your choice."

But it's not all about brain power. Thornton will benefit from incendiary grenades and the ability to mod his guns by adding silencers, sights, different barrels and so on. He'll also rely on the player's skill as much as his own – a well-aimed shot on the gamer's behalf is going to hit the target, no question – and yet it will be important for Michael to learn new skills. The more adept he becomes (in martial arts, for example) the more effective he is as a character.

Created with the Unreal 3 engine and with an over-the-shoulder third-person perspective, *Alpha Protocol* is still a work in progress and we can't wait to see the finished result.





■ *Dragon Age*! I loved *Baldur's Gate*; it was a rich, full world with some of the best characters you could wish for. *Neverwinter Nights* was also a good game, but not as strong as *Baldur's Gate* – it's almost as if the switch to 3D took so much effort that the story and characters lost out. So I'm hoping that *Dragon Age* is going to do both with knobs on.

➔ Defenceless Old Lady

■ *Street Fighter IV*. The number of 10p pieces I spent on the original *Street Fighter 2* arcade machine is mental. The best fighting game ever and by all accounts the fourth instalment brings back *SF2*'s great gameplay without the overblown combos/mental button skill work of *SF3*.

➔ damoxuk

■ 2009 looks to be the year of mammoth RTS slugfests, particularly between *Starcraft II* and *Dawn Of War II*. The former seems to concentrating on polishing classic gameplay to a mirror shine and appealing to the e-sports crowd. With *Dawn Of War II*, Relic seems to be pushing the boundaries of what constitutes an RTS. It's emphasising squad gameplay and providing 'wargear' drops in almost an MMO style.

➔ Dag

■ *Alan Wake* has been a long while coming, but it's from the guys who made the *Max Payne* games, so they can be forgiven for trying to bring out a game that looks totally sweet and taking their time about it.

➔ zero1979

FABLE II

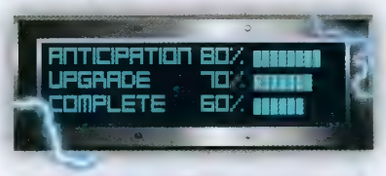
Developer Lionhead Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Game Studios
Website www.xbox.com/en-GB/games/f/fable2

Much has been said about *Fable II*. Much more has been written. What hasn't been revealed is whether or not this game will be coming to the PC. "There has been no confirmation that *Fable II* will be released for the PC," Microsoft told us. So we pushed. "The situation is that it's Xbox 360-only at the moment," Microsoft insisted. But those final three words gave us hope.

You see, while we have been enjoying the game on the Xbox 360, we know Lionhead boss Peter Molyneux has a knack of pulling off something special on the PC. While he was at Bullfrog he created some sterling titles (*Dungeon Keeper*, *Populous*, *Theme Park*) that arguably formed his best body of PC work. And when he established Lionhead, PC titles such as *Black & White* and *The Movies* ensured he took the worthy honour of an OBE in 2004.

So with that pedigree, we would wager our editor's entire annual salary that *Fable II* will not only see a PC release, but will be better for it, too. But why wouldn't we bet our own dollar? Mainly because Molyneux said in October that he felt the PC market was in tatters, dominated by *The Sims* and *World Of Warcraft* and pepped up only by titles such as *Crysis*.

And yet we mere workers are being overly cautious. More likely Microsoft – perhaps worried about piracy levels on the PC – wants to maximise pre-Christmas sales of *Fable II* on the Xbox 360 before announcing a PC version. Indeed, Molyneux himself says, "If you recall, we didn't release a PC version of *Fable* immediately. I don't think we even announced it immediately. There's no announcement either positive or negative on a PC version just yet." So we expect some good news over the coming months from Lionhead.



When it is announced we can expect the same story – from the first decision of whether to be a boy or a girl, to the gentle tutorial that eases you into the world of Albion and all of the quandaries that need to be solved once you find your feet – combined with better visuals and greater control. As with the 360 version, you'll be able to choose between a breadcrumb-laden path of virtuousness or one that's downright nasty, but beware, such an attitude can bite you firmly on the bum later on (and even alter your appearance). Either way, you'll be accompanied by your trusty dog through this intriguing RPG – one of the most useful sidekicks of any game ever made.

Uniquely British and very much a standout console title of 2008, *Fable II* will become an instant classic when it comes to PC and, given his lofty gaming ambition, Molyneux may well even tout the version set to head our way as a 10/10 game. And that would be one up from the 360 version.

PORTAL 2

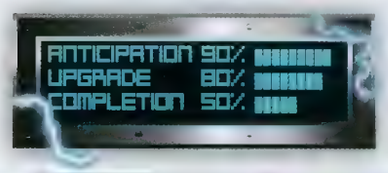
Developer Valve **Publisher** Valve
Website orange.half-life2.com/portal

One of the best surprises of 2007 was *Portal*. As a first-person action puzzler, it provided a welcome respite from an avalanche of shooters at the time, given that it was short yet wholesomely original. Over the coming year, though, we're likely to bear witness to *Portal 2*. But will a sequel of a game that astounded so many just by creeping up relatively unannounced be able to conjure up that same chin-hitting-the-floor feeling?

While we can't even begin to answer that just yet, we can offer some insights into the development of the game so far. First of all, we know the game is due, since that much was made clear by creator Kim Swift in February 2008. She said it would be a full sequel rather than an expansion map pack and that multiplayer was being considered.

More recently, a casting call was placed on the website Breakdown Express looking for a solid voice actor to play Cave Johnson, the deceased head of the fictional *Portal* experiment company Aperture Science. According to the listing, Johnson will be a sidekick-cum-antagonist, which gives a small clue to the plot this time around.

It also included a painted portrait and biography as well as a script sample, which suggests that Johnson has been resurrected inside a computer and is pondering whether or not this has robbed him of his 'final reward', a suggestion of a mind on the edge. Intriguing, for sure, and we can't wait.



LEGO UNIVERSE

Developer NetDevil **Publisher** The Lego Group
Website universe.lego.com

Imagine being able to build anything you want out of Lego without the worry of losing key pieces under the sofa. According to developer NetDevil, *Lego Universe* will enable you to do just that, with immense brick-assembling power jammed into a title that could do for MMOs what the Nintendo Wii has done for console gaming.

In seeking to revolutionise online PC play, *Lego Universe* aims to create an entire virtual world in which players can join forces to unleash their creative talents. You'll immediately be asked to build your own Lego person and then embark on a series of quests with other gamers. These companions will help you find new treasure and scores of extra bricks. They will also assist you in defeating enemies and unlocking new game zones.

Based on a subscription model and with the aim being to create a growing online fan community, *Lego Universe* will draw on the Lego sets that have enthralled us over the years. There will be battles between Lego knights and dragons and Lego sailors and pirates. And best of all, players can decide whether others can touch their creations. Should they allow 'alterations', you can bet gamers will have a smashing time.

Ryan Seabury, lead producer at NetDevil, told **Total PC Gaming**: "Just saying the words 'Lego' and 'online game' to anyone gets them excited. Everyone instantly starts imagining the possibilities. It's exciting to bring the Lego brick online so players can build and play with friends all over the world. The game will provide new opportunities for creativity, exploration and discovery and we can't wait to see what players will create in this new virtual space."

THE SIMS 3

Developer Maxis **Publisher** EA
Website thesims3.ea.com

With 100 million sales to date, it's little wonder Will Wright wants to continue his life simulation legacy. Promising to be 'bigger and better' as most sequels do, there are certain elements to this third title that will ensure queues form around the block upon its release. One of them is the ability to create a Sim that has the looks and personality of just about anyone, yourself included, using advanced customisation options (there are 70 personality traits to chose from). You will even be able to customise cars, clothes and furniture.

Life will revolve around Sunset Valley, an open neighbourhood with other Sims in the the town developing their own traits and motives independently of your involvement. Executive producer Ben Bell explains, "You're going to be able to explore the aspects of life that goes on when you're not at home."

ANTICIPATION	80%
UPGRADE	60%
COMPLETE	95%

STARCRAFT II

Developer Blizzard Entertainment **Publisher** Activision Blizzard
Website www.starcraft2.com

As the world waited for *Starcraft II* to fly in from Blizzard, along came the rumours that the development was being postponed until *Diablo III* was complete. CEO Paul Sams denied them, saying a dedicated veteran team was working on *Starcraft II*. We're continuing to wait for an official release date, despite this follow-up to the 1998 original being showcased in South Korea in May 2007.

But come it will – with three playable races (Protoss, Terran and Zerg) and a heavy online focus. Improvements have been made to the Battle.net system, single-player is now non-linear and there will be a level editor. Blizzard producer Chris Sigaty wants the real-time strategy game to appeal to his mother, "We've tried to make sure that it's perfectly balanced for e-sport, but look – I'm going to try to get my mom to play this game."

ANTICIPATION	90%
UPGRADE	65%
COMPLETE	70%

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Developer BioWare **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Website dragonage.bioware.com

Described by the developer as the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*, single-player *Dragon Age: Origins* may have been announced way back in 2004, but until this year, we've learned little about it. Suffice to say it's a return to the fantasy genre for BioWare, a chance, as project director and executive producer Dan Tudge explains, to make a "dark heroic fantasy RPG". Party-based adventuring will be important, with tactical combat drawing on the abilities of your team members. Your experience within the game will depend on your character's 'origin story' – this will define your place in the game and influence the plot twists. It will also be possible to shape your character's appearance and choose from a variety of talents and spells. What's more, the game has been written from the ground up, and the intention is to establish a world that can grow with planned sequels.

ANTICIPATION	85%
UPGRADE	80%
COMPLETE	85%

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE THREE

Developer Valve **Publisher** Valve
Website orange.half-life2.com/hl2ep2

When a game has received near-perfect critical acclaim and dozens of Game of the Year awards, people itch for fresh information about possible sequels. *Half-Life 2* is one of those games. The dystopian shenanigans in City 17 surrounding the life of scientist Gordon Freeman provided some of the most cutting-edge gameplay ever seen.

And what has Valve done? It has placed *Episode Three* tantalisingly before us, gushed over its advances in AI and physics, and then made us wait. Oh, has it made us wait. "The next time you play as Gordon will be longer than the distance between *Half-Life 2* to *Episode One*, and *Episode One* to *Episode Two*," said marketing director Doug Lombardi.

So what can we expect? Doug says the team that worked on *Episode Two* has worked on the third, and the next instalment may – only may, mind – end with a battle at a research station in the Arctic. The action will be removed from City 17 too. As for the future beyond *Episode Three*, if we may be so bold as to project so far ahead, Lombardi says *Episode Three* will end the current story arc, although further *Half-Life* games in this blistering franchise will still be made.

STREET FIGHTER IV

Developer Capcom **Publisher** Capcom
Website www.streetfighter.com

It's more than just the return of *Street Fighter*, it's a return to the *Street Fighter* that utterly consumed those of us alive and gaming in 1992," Capcom's PR man Leo Tan tells us, alluding to *Street Fighter II*. But then he would say that. And yet although the game's release has slipped into 2009, the reception it is getting on consoles is proof that he may well be right and we are actually looking at something special.

It's almost complete, "82 per cent complete, whatever that means," says Leo – and it will not only be in 3D, but will incorporate a new Focus Attack and fresh characters. As for the power needed to run the game? "The idea is that we reach as many people as possible," says Leo. "You probably won't need a quad-core PC to be able to throw a hadoken."

CALL OF DUTY 6

■ **Developer** Infinity Ward ■ **Publisher** Activision
■ **Website** www.callofduty.com

E.T.A NOV 2009

Most of us have barely broken the back of *Call Of Duty: World At War*, but despite being scarred by the opening cut-throat scenes and all-too realistic depictions of war, we're already wanting more. Ambushing the attention being paid to Treyarch's non-casual slaughter fest is Infinity Ward, makers of *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. As is the way with this franchise, the baton is being passed over once again, and IW is now hard at work on *Call Of Duty 6*. Only this time, they're leaping into the future.

Rumours abound that Infinity Ward is going to give the franchise a space-age twist, based on an insider at the studio saying it was working on a new sci-fi title. It's all still a long way off, though, and even Activision is unsure as to when this game will appear. In one breath, CEO Mike Griffith talks about IW delivering another game of ground-breaking quality in 2009, and in another he mutes a 2010 release.

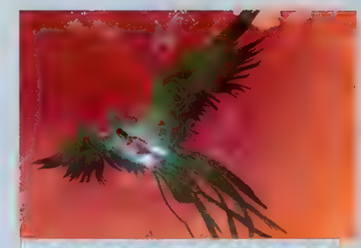
But going off past history, Infinity Ward may alter geographical settings, but it certainly keeps its core gameplay intact, and for that we get a mission-based first-person shooter that alternates between characters engaged in various battles across the world, all delivered amid a heavy script. It's a formula that has served IW well in the first, second and fourth games of the series and we don't expect it to change now.

BIOSHOCK 2

■ **Developer** 2K Marin ■ **Publisher** 2K Games
■ **Website** www.bioshockgame.com

E.T.A SEP 2009

I think Rapture is a rich world that I can keep mining," says lead artist Hogarth De La Plante. "There's so much more we can get out of it." And so we come to *BioShock 2: Sea Of Dreams*, due to be released around October 2009 and created by 2K Marin rather than 2K Boston, which developed the original, although Ken Levine will be involved in some capacity. Take-Two is being rather cagey about further details, which is a shame given the ambiguous nature of the recent trailer, but we can say that the game will be based after the first *BioShock* and we can expect the return of at least one of the Little Sisters.



AION: TOWER OF ETERNITY

■ **Developer** NCsoft
■ **Publisher** NCsoft
■ **Website** eu.aiononline.com/en
■ **Release date** March

Created by South Korea's NCsoft, the brains behind *Lineage*, *Aion: Tower Of Eternity* is an attempt to appeal to Western tastes. Out go the dwarves, elves and orcs and in comes the the more human-like Elyos and Asmodians – polar opposites of good and evil. After spending time playing with the facial and body features of your character, you'll be plunged into a fantasy MMO world of magic spells and the like, but with a twist on the usual *World Of Warcraft* shenanigans to the point where player-versus-player and player-versus-environment are combined into a single play style. NCsoft is not looking to rewrite the rules of MMOs, merely try to get them just right. We'll soon see if it has succeeded.

WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II

■ **Developer** Relic Entertainment
■ **Publisher** THQ
■ **Website** dawnofwar2.com
■ **Release date** May/June

Lead designer Jonny Ebbert has compared *Dawn Of War II* to the movie *300*'s Battle of the Thermopylae, and what you will get are destructible environments, solid solider AI and graphic fighting in a game made up of epic proportions. You will be able to chose from four races: Tyranids, Space Marines, Orkz or Eldar. And influenced in part by *Company Of Heroes*, the single-player campaign of *Dawn Of War II* is as much about trying to keep as many, if not all of your band of brothers alive as possible as it is anything else. It's certainly going to be a real-time strategy game to watch out for.

E.T.A DEC 2009

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

Developer BioWare Austin **Publisher** LucasArts
Website www.swtor.com

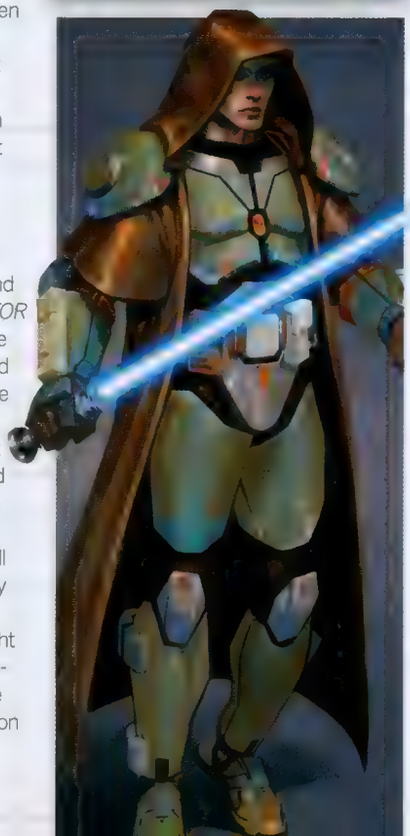
If you had to name a franchise that has leaped to infinity and beyond, it would have to be *Star Wars*. The never-ending series of tie-ins, movies, animations, merchandise, Lego sets and, of course, games, means George Lucas' baby is never too far from our thoughts. Now we have *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMO on its way and, as with all games which let us swish around with a Lightsaber, it's understandably getting everyone very excited, including us.

Made by BioWare, *The Old Republic* will be PC-only, sporting a look that is cartoon in nature and yet having a fast-paced, epic combat system far more realistic than in their previous *Knights Of The Old Republic* games. Indeed BioWare's chief Greg Zeschuk says the actions will look as if they could be taking place in a *Star Wars* movie and they will focus on choreographed, powerful moves.

TOR will also be deeper and more narrative-driven than its gaming predecessors. It will be set 300 years after the original games and 3,600 years before the *Star Wars* movies, but good and evil prevails with players having to choose between the Jedis or the Siths in an impending war between the Sith Empire and the Galactic Republic. Other classes will no doubt be added, and lead designer James Ohlen says, "The stories will focus on who the player is, taking into account his role and class."

The more information trickles through, the clearer it becomes that BioWare is aiming high – there will be so much dialogue, so many quests and more than enough content to make *TOR* bigger than all of the previous BioWare games put together. Some have asked why the developer hasn't simply made *KOTOR 3*, but at the recent unveiling in San Franscisco, Zeschuk joked that *The Old Republic* is *KOTOR 3/4/5* and beyond. Suffice to say there will be no cross-over between the two factions and no dialogue, quests or content will be reused between classes. It's simply going to be that big.

"We've looked at what MMOs do right and we're taking it further," BioWare co-founder Ray Muzyka told us. "So we've including PvP and character progression and combat and all of those genre-defining elements as well as adding a strong story – the fourth pillar, as we're calling it. There's a feeling that your actions have consequences. We want to capture the sense of control."



The game will have a crafting system and there will also be opportunities to travel from planet to planet. There will also be cameo appearances from the *Star Wars* expanded universe and *KOTOR* games. And plans are afoot to include vehicles – the types of which haven't yet been announced – as well as a mentoring system that lets players of differing abilities plough forth together.

Although George Lucas has admitted to never playing *World Of Warcraft*, he is nevertheless said to be excited about this new game. But more importantly, it's becoming clear how much its developers are relishing the task. Rob Chestney wrote a fascinating blog post on the game's website, stating how proud he was to work on the game. In it he gushed, "We're staking BioWare's reputation on the story in this game, and that's a both tremendous responsibility and a tremendous privilege." And to that we say may the force be with them. Although not too loudly. It does sound a little corny, after all.

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PREVIEW
DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

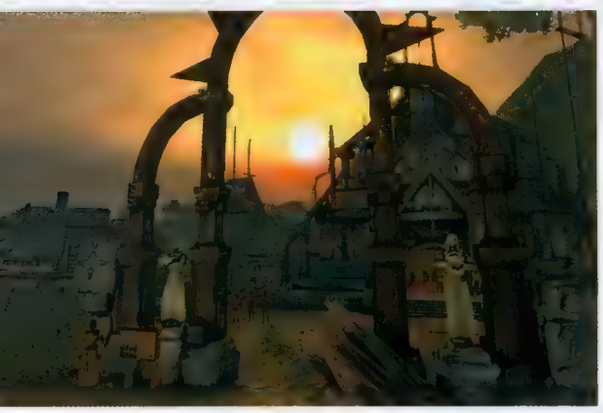
"Every now and then you are the bringer of death, it's you versus 50 guys. And you totally kick their ass in a single fireball"

Within the dark fantasy of *DA:O*, the undead aren't necessarily the scariest monsters you'll encounter
THAC0 has gone, replaced with a bespoke – and less confusing – combat system

Unfortunately, a beer or two won't bond party members with polar alignments

While King Cailan is battling the Darkspawn, you must light the tower beacon and fight the ogre sentinel

Recruit at least one tank for your frontlines, though advanced players can be more experimental



Release date **March**

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Neck-deep in gore and a new origin story, BioWare shares its darker Dragon Age secrets

Info

GENRE Fantasy RPG
DEVELOPER Electronic Arts
PUBLISHER BioWare
WEB dragonage.bioware.com

They're not the dirty, truculent and mischievous pixie-creatures of pre-Tolkien fantasy, but the elves of Ferelden are treated by humans with the same regard as vagrants and vagabonds. And while magi are employed in the city of Ostagar to defend its walls and magic is respected by its population, its practitioners are distrusted, feared and even hated by some. Generally speaking, choose an elf or a mage character, especially an elven mage, and you'll encounter prejudice by the bucketful wherever you go in *Dragon Age: Origins*. Our foray into *DA:O*'s equivalent-of-*Baldur's-Gate* city already hints at the ominous direction BioWare is taking its new IP in. But sitting in front of five of BioWare's top development team members prompted the obvious question: what exactly makes *DA:O* different from *BG I* and *II* or *Neverwinter Nights*?

"We took a darker and more gritty approach," executive producer Dan Tudge told us, "It's next-gen so we took an over-the-shoulder view, enabling you to drop right into the world. But a lot of the great elements of *Baldur's Gate*, like storytelling, tactical party-based combat and party interaction are still there. The team took a lot of the things that went on in *Baldur's Gate* and especially *Baldur's Gate II* and wanted to build on that legacy and the next-generation experience. And it ties in with the origin stories, the idea that every one of us could play our own experience and shape it through the game. It has that double meaning there."

"A lot of the good stuff from our other games is there too," said lead programmer Ross Gardener, "Such as the full voiceover from *Mass Effect*. The *Baldur's Gate* experience is there at its core, but the innovations that have come into the industry in the meantime we've leveraged into *Dragon Age*."

"The other thing is that we're not following an IP anymore, we've created our own" added art director Dean Andersen, "We have a lot of freedom that we didn't have before to not only explore more mature themes in terms of darker, deeper stories, but also for the rules. The old rule system for *Baldur's Gate* – the Dungeons & Dragons system, it's set up to be a pen-and-paper game. It's made so that you can calculate things easily in your head. Whereas computers have a lot more processing power, you, uh..."

"Roll dice in milliseconds." Dan appended. "Yeah, so there's a lot more environmental strategy in combat. It's more strategic and tactical from that point of view. In a lot of ways it's a better combat system, more fun than *Baldur's Gate*."

Indeed, THAC0 (To Hit Armour Class 0) was stripped out of TSR's fourth edition Dungeons & Dragons rule set, but this *Baldur's Gate* staple no longer applies to *DA:O* anyway. Although the hardcore dice-rolling game that BioWare was famed for in

These horrors are easily defeated early in the elf origin story

PREVIEW
DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

- From one of the most renowned RPG studios
- Dark and original storyline
- Combat has evolved for current-gen technology

Hot or not?

- A new and untested IP
- Heavily story-driven. The plot must work or *DA:O* will fail
- D&D hardcores might not be happy with the new system

Wolves can be infected, and just like the Darkspawn they become powerful abominations

» the early part of this decade hasn't gone, BioWare's bespoke rule set is a much less transparent system. Exploring the world in an as-yet-unseen elven origin quest demo hinted on the depth of *DA:O*'s combat: no less tactical and engaging, but more intuitive and less intimidating than its predecessors.

Taking the reins of an elf character, we formed the support half of a two-man elven team led by a somewhat arrogant companion, who made a better (although not ideal) tank. Our academic quest was to explore an ancient ruin in search of elven history and naturally involved a dungeon, traps, baddies and treasure; true BioWare fantasy fodder. It led us along a verdant woodland path and into a false sense of security, before ensnaring us on a hidden trap and sending two giant spiders to finish the job at the mouth of the open entrance to the dungeon.

Current-generation technologies like the zoom to third-person from classic overhead with a massively detailed environment are a given, but BioWare has made what sounds like subtle differences to combat on paper, but mean a huge difference in practice. The mesh between real combat physics and dice-rolling has been refined. Stepping up the incline of the slope down to the dungeon, we had the tactical advantage of raining arrows down onto the spiders while they attacked our stricken fellow that, unlike *Baldur's Gate*, would be impossible if something was obstructing our line of sight. Vice versa, ducking behind a boulder doesn't grant you a *Tabula Rasa*-style defence bonus, but it will protect you from incoming projectiles. Your stats have a major part to play in combat, of course, but graphical and physics technology has advanced to the point that BioWare can now use them to augment the system for a more natural combat strategy. Using the boulder-throwing ogre in one of the *DA:O* website demo reels as an example, Dan explained this in more detail. "There's certainly a point within the math where even if you physically move your character out of the way, you'll receive a hit. It's not real physics in the sense that there's a point of contact and the boulder actually has to cross paths with your mesh, but there is way more ability to avoid things. And we don't just call the talent backstab and roll a check for it, you actually have to move the character around for a backstab. So the real-time aspect of that has been brought forward from *Baldur's Gate*."

With the quantum leaps in technology that PC hardware has made since *Neverwinter Nights*, BioWare has had some serious overhead to play with for *DA:O*. This has resulted in big bosses with interactive animations, such as the ogre's grab ability seen in the website demo, the mauling attack of the Bereskarn we witnessed at the end of the new demo and undoubtedly something really sexy from the, as yet, unveiled dragon encounters. BioWare has also made efforts to further the mature theme of *DA: O* in a more obvious way, immersing the player in a fantasy environment without the sugar-coating, in the form of an abattoir of gore. Blood gushes from every wound inflicted; roll a critical hit and your character will execute brutal fatalities specific to your class and weapon style. Moreover, blood will soak characters involved in close melee combat and is persistent too, which has resulted in some unexpected comic moments in development. "There are some innovative ways of cleaning your armour. You can switch it out..." Dan began to tell us, then Dean broke into laughter before explaining, "There's this touching scene where you're talking to a dear loved one, talking serious stuff and he says 'you look so beautiful right now' and you look, bleughh!"

"Yeah, so we took some licence with some of the blood in conversation. You've got an archer and a mage working ranged, then you've got your tank, and if they all step into conversation, they're all pristine, but the tank is just drenched."

Sadly, there's no permanent scarring for serious injuries, though this was considered. "There's always the joke when you're playing that your character should be one big mass of scar tissue because they get wiped out so often," said Ross. "We had a lot of ways we thought about customising a character, and that's one thing we had to decide against. It would be neat, though. Maybe it's something we could explore later; the idea that every time you go through the game, you die or get some injury, you get some new scars. Like every time you get hit by a fireball..."

"It would be like, 'can you cast 'skin graft' on me?'" joked Mike Laidlaw. Ross laughed, "We could make that a spell!" »

From the people who brought you...

1998

» **Baldur's Gate** A risky foray into D&D PC games proves to be a massive success

2000

» **Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn** The follow-up is a fair bit darker, but even more successful

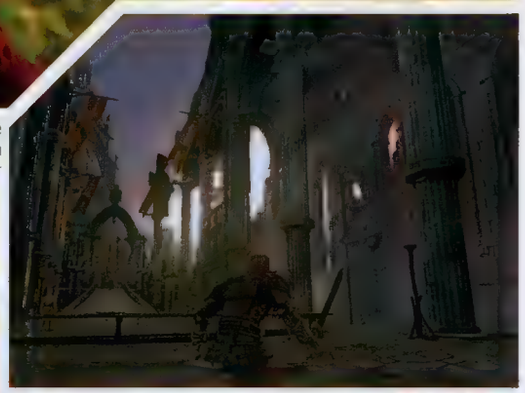
2002

» **Neverwinter Nights** The genre finally evolves into three dimensions

2007

» **Mass Effect** It may have been a console game first, but it's still distinctly BioWare

What with the horrors that lie beyond its gates, sundown isn't a good time to be outside Ostagar



Developer interview

Dan Tudge, Beniot Houle, Mike Laidlaw & Ross Gardener

»BioWare

TPCG: We know that there are six origin stories in total – can you tell us something about the background to these stories, the world of Ferelden and the Darkspawn?

BH: The Darkspawn fit into a few basic categories. There are familiar creatures like wolves and boars, things that allow the player to familiarise themselves with the world – it's not that far off Earth. Our fantasy creatures are inspired by real-world records of things that don't exist but could have. Then you have the bulk of the creature gallery, which is the dark and the horrible. These are creatures that, when you see them, you know you're not going to have a little party with them, they're there to destroy you and there's nothing but rage, hate and loathing – that's where the Darkspawn fit in. A lot of the twisted nature, their colour and creed has ties in the world itself, where they came from and how they got to be these monstrosities.

ML: Thematically they are vessels of corruption. They are the physical embodiment of evil, they're *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*. They're humanoid, and there's almost as much horror in the familiar but paradoxical than the monstrosities of Lovecraft, where it's so indescribable that I'm going to say it in eight pages. But it's better to have creatures that resonate with the themes of the game and having a unified creation of the universe in a traditional BioWare title – it's all about building up a world. In the first game you'll see so much of it, enough to see that it's a huge foundation on which to build.

TPCG: The 'first game'? Are you working on a *DA:O* sequel already?

ML: We can't say too much about this because it's about what these things are and where they came from – that's part of the discovery of it!

TPCG: Tell us about the Fade.

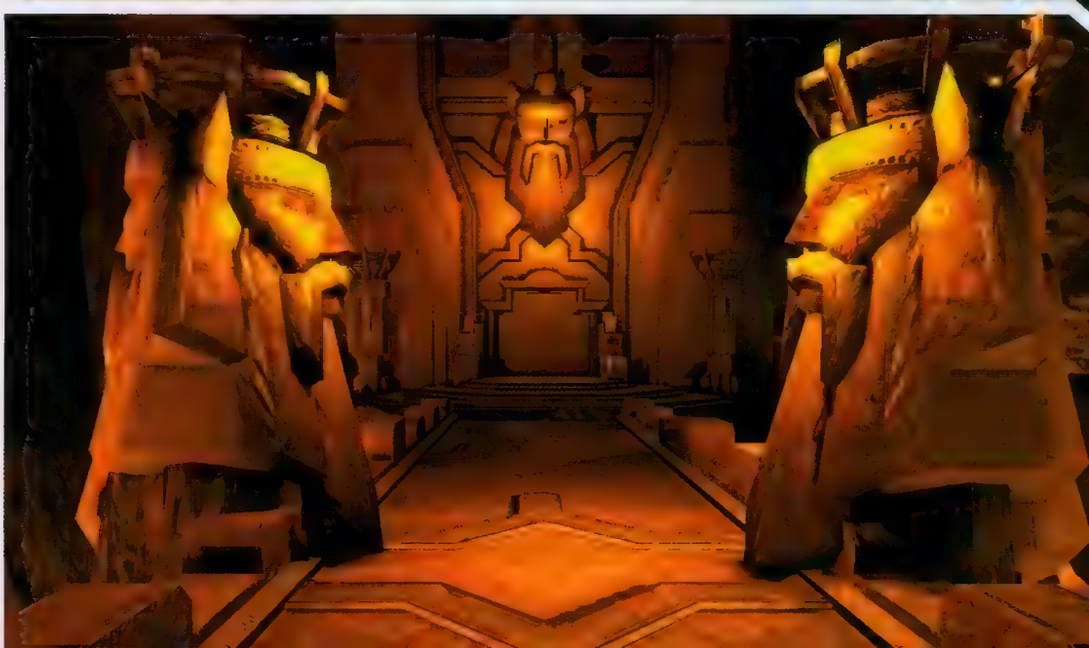
RG: We can't talk too much about the origins of the Darkspawn, but the Fade is the land of dreams. It's kind of this unknown place that the mages are very drawn to. Most of the magic in *Dragon Age* comes from the Fade and the interesting thing is that this isn't pixies and unicorns.

ML: The world of dreams!

RG: No! It's like a world of raw emotion, built with spirits and demons. The theme you'll see with the game is that magic isn't something like 'Oh, I'm going to brush my teeth with a spell'. Things are much darker than that – mages are basically walking a line: they're very, very powerful, but the risks they take with interacting with this space are ridiculous. The Fade is the conduit through which magical powers are drawn, but with major things at stake.

DT: You will enter the Fade as a part of your 'Harrowing' for the mage origin story.

"Every time you get hit by a fireball it would be like, 'can you cast skin graft on me?'"



An inn in Ostagar: a prime location for recruiting or drowning your sorrows

Mage spells include lightning storm, which is AOE so beware of friendly fire

» Playing a bigger, well-rounded party with a mage, thief and tank complementing an archer we found ourselves slipping into old *BG* and *NWN* habits – good habits, that is. *DA:O* can be played in full real-time, but old hands at BioWare games will remember the benefits of interrupting combat with a staccato of pauses. "I think you learn very quickly that if you just rush in headlong into the group, you're not gonna make it." Dan reminded us, "You're definitely going to have to pause just like you did in *Baldur's Gate*. For example, I see three Hurlocks ahead, one looks like an emissary and one's an alpha – so I'd better take that alpha out first. So I take the meat of my party and send them right at the alpha. I'm also gonna cast sleep with my magi and hopefully put a whole bunch of them asleep, so I pile everything on that alpha and take the power out of that group. Then I might sneak in and peel one off, stealth in and backstab him. Tactically, you really have to think about combat. It definitely makes sense to position your archers, so if there's a knoll or a platform – get them up on there."

"But only if you have a clear line of sight," added Ross, "If there's anything in between then the arrows will hit it. There's one thing that we've taken from MMOs and that's the concept of aggro, that's something that's becoming awfully common nowadays. You can use your tank to taunt or annoy the enemy in some way and make them focus there. You couldn't really do that in *BG* because the AI wasn't so smart, if you took a tank in first it would just focus on that."

This certainly marries up with our experience, only in the encounter we had with the orc-like Hurlocks and the roles were reversed. We were taunted by an emissary who lured our warrior across a bridge and into a swinging log trap, laying him flat out. Riled by the audacity of the AI, we seriously underestimated the opposition and foolishly sent our thief in to tank while our mage and archer took up sniping positions. We were creamed by several soldiers who had been waiting in the rear and, in time-honoured *Baldur's Gate* tradition, we re-loaded our game. "You can get in there with a plan and get completely wiped out," said Ross, "Sometimes it takes two or three times, and every time you bring your game to a new level, bringing in more tactics and learning how the system works."

"And the true grace is, of course, occasionally encountering enemies you can totally destroy," Dean added, "Every now and then you are the bringer of death, it's you versus 50 guys. And you totally kick their ass in a single fireball. You have to break the pace sometimes, give the player a breather and say, 'Well done. Here you go: kick their ass.'"

Our last question was regarding party dynamics: famously, party characters of opposing alignments in *Baldur's Gate* would bicker with each other and provide the player with entertaining banter throughout. But inevitably you had to side with one or the other, resulting in repercussions somewhere down the line. The same dynamic has been expanded for *DA:O*: putting a good party together isn't as simple as recruiting the most powerful characters available, you'll need to weigh each member's martial contribution against their personality, ethics, race and gender. "Each character has their own personality," Dean told us, "they may agree with what you do or disagree and get upset. You may have some affection for a particular character as a player, but then there's the tactical side of things. You probably don't want a whole party of fairly weak characters as you're probably going to want someone on the frontlines to block. So you have to make sure you're supporting their abilities while you're balancing their personalities."

Dan finished our interview with a teaser, which elicited enthusiastic nodding and knowing glances from the rest of the team. "Gender doesn't make any difference to your attributes, but the way people react to you. It will also make a difference to your origin story. With some of the origin stories your gender will make a very significant difference, especially one, which has got a lot of 'emotional' reaction..." Or should that be a *Mass-ive Effect* on the *DA:O* story?

Ben Biggs

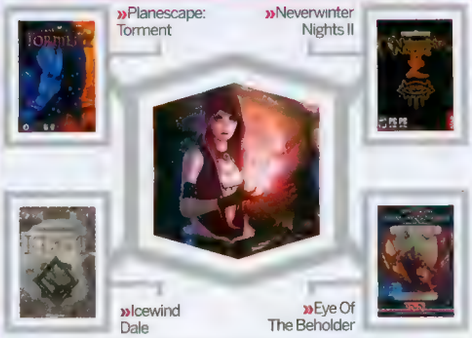
Spec-ulation

What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess

» **CPU:** 2.6GHz dual-core
» **RAM:** 2GB
» **GRAPHICS:** GeForce 8800GT

A big zoom, multiple characters, high detail and lighting effects mean masses of number crunching. Visuals will play a practical as well as aesthetic role, so a current mid-range machine is recommended.

Game DNA What makes up the game?



Complete-o-meter 85%

Just how finished is this game?

BioWare has given us a ballpark spring 2009 release date – we suspect March at the earliest. It needs polishing, VO needs recording and some bug-crunching is required.

PREVIEW
OVERLORD II

Release date **Summer 2009**

OVERLORD II

The mischievous, murderous but ever so loveable minions return to wreak havoc on the world. Bless 'em

Info **GENRE** Third-person action adventure **DEVELOPER** Triumph Studios **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **WEB** www.codemasters.co.uk

The first *Overlord* was a twisted fantasy romp that turned the usual fantasy conventions on their head by casting you as the villain of the story, an evil Overlord out for revenge against the heroes who defeated him. The story, penned by award-winning scriptwriter Rhianna Pratchett, ruthlessly mocked and pilloried just about every worn-out fantasy convention there is, but what made *Overlord* stand out was its unusual gameplay. Perhaps best described as a funny and irreverent cross between *Pikmin*, *Fable* and *Sacrifice* (with a dash of *Dungeon Keeper*), it introduced the world to the Minions, a hilarious group of goblins under your command that even the most jaded player couldn't help but fall in love with. Their crazy antics as they rampaged across the land doing your bidding, dressed in old bits of armour and even old pumpkin heads, pretty much made the game. Triumph has spent two years working on the return of the Overlord and his mischievous minions, and the results, while far from complete, are looking very promising indeed.

- The return of the ever-loveable minions from *Overlord*
- Your evil nature is directly tied into the gameplay
- The world and concept are bigger and better

Hot or not?

- Lack of story branches
- The Overlord is still a bit clunky to control
- Myriad minion gameplay styles may not mesh

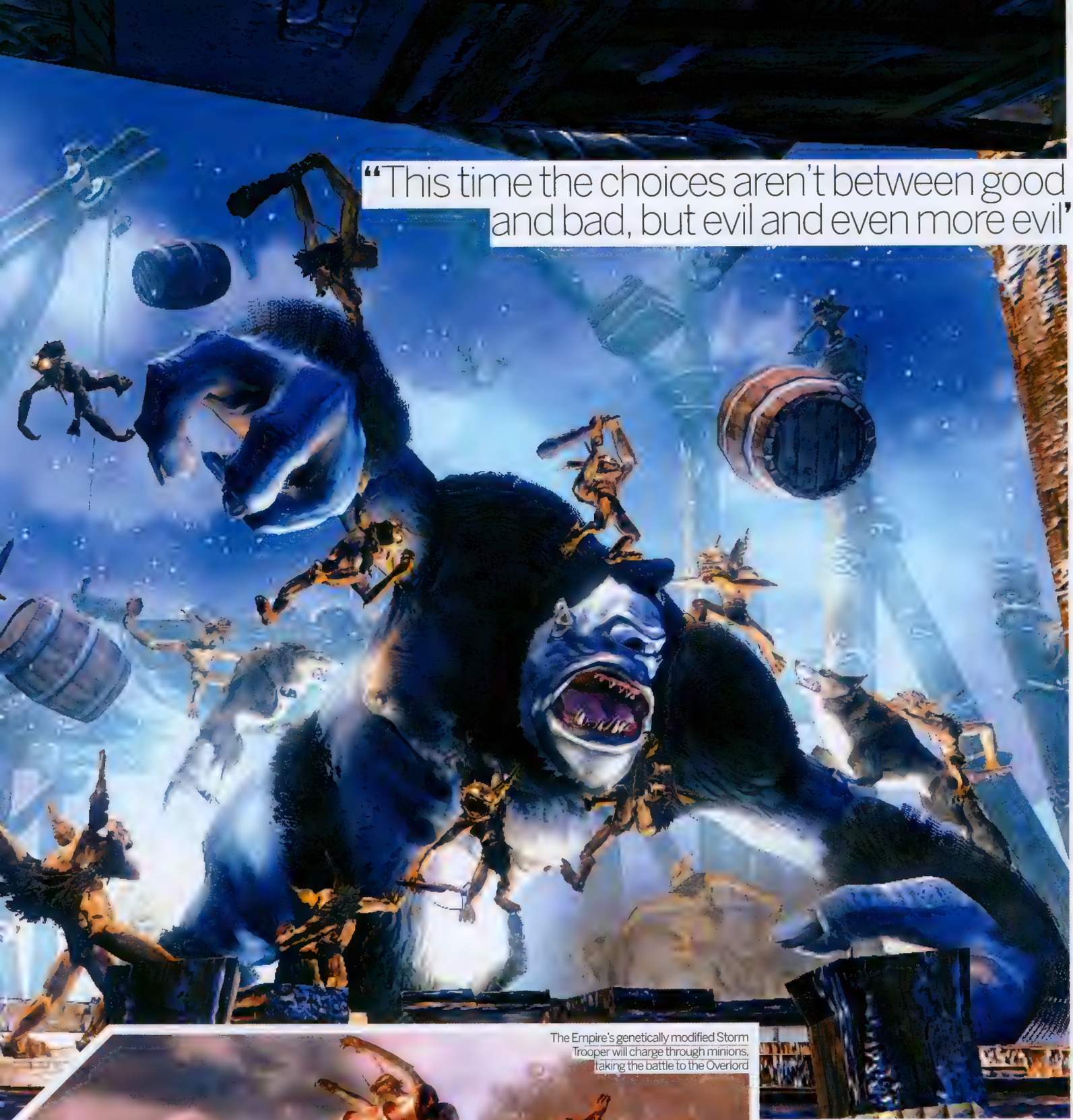
With the original Overlord having been trapped in the Abyss at the end of the last game, this story focuses on his heir, fighting to regain his power in a world now ruled by the non-magical Glorious Empire, a *Swords And Sandals*-like parody of the Roman Empire. "With *Overlord II* we wanted to make everything bigger, not just the concept, but also the core gameplay centred on the minions," says Lennart Sas, Triumph's creative director. While all the fantasy elements from the previous game will return, the joy of widening the concept, he claims, lies not only in being able to introduce new gameplay elements, but new targets to be lampooned by Pratchett's signature humour. "The Overlord is everything that the Empire is not. The Overlord is savage, magical and evil, while the Empire is ordered, sculptured, whiter than white and opulent, so of course he wants to destroy it!" laughs Sas. "What he doesn't know, or care about, is that underneath that veil the Empire is corrupt and decadent!"

This time the Glorious Empire has embarked upon a campaign of magical inquisition, forcing magical creatures to flee to the corners of the world, where the Overlord will have to go to kill them and reclaim his magic power. You'll rampage across the icy Christmas world of Nordburg, Fairyland and the Wastelands to harvest life force before facing off with the Empire. Killing magical creatures brings you into conflict with Florian Greenheart and the Soldiers of the Sanctuary – elf greenpeace warriors seeking to save magical creatures. We only caught a glimpse of this faction in action, but the developer promises that they will have their own green approach to combat. "It's not like we're against nature activists or anything like that, we make fun of everyone, Imperialists, green hippies and even the Overlord himself. It's basically a game where anything goes and because we use humour we get away with it," says Sas.

While a bigger, richer world is welcome, the true stars of *Overlord* are the wicked-yet-adorable minions, and players won't find them neglected. Returning eager to wreak havoc are the burly Browns, the fire-throwing Reds, the sneaky Greens and the waterproof healers, the Blues. *Overlord II* is already looking quite graphically impressive with cartoony, stylised graphics that give it the feel of a Pixar film crossed with a slightly darker version of the Asterix comic books, especially when the characters of the Empire are on screen. You'll be pleased to know your minions are particularly detailed, and you can make out their gruesome little faces as they gaze up adoringly at their Master. Minions are even more individual this time, with their own names, special traits and a wide range of makeshift weapons and armour. Just watching them club baby seals to death, fight a *Donkey Kong*-inspired Yeti or terrify hapless peasants brought proud tears to our eyes.

The Overlord can still only control 50 minions at a time, but the game promises to feature battles against armies with up to 200 characters on screen. "One of our main goals in *Overlord II* is to make the battles even more epic, with massive minion versus Empire army conflicts. The first game had more intimate RPG-type skirmishes and we wanted to open up the combat," explains Sas. A handy mini-map system has been added to the game making it easier to find the bigger levels' many objectives. During our hands-on we got to control the Overlord and some minions as they attempted to storm an Empire city gate guarded by catapults. As with the first game, our minions dutifully followed us as we moved, and we could then direct them to specific targets by locking onto them. We had a 360 pad for our hands-on, »

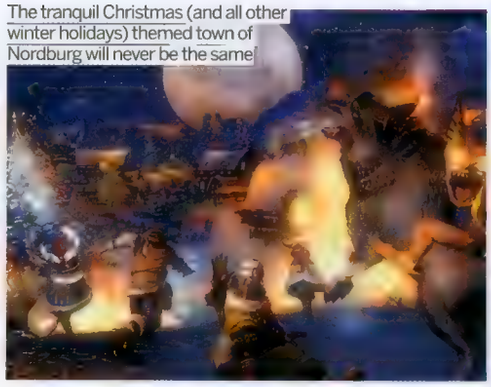
"This time the choices aren't between good and bad, but evil and even more evil"



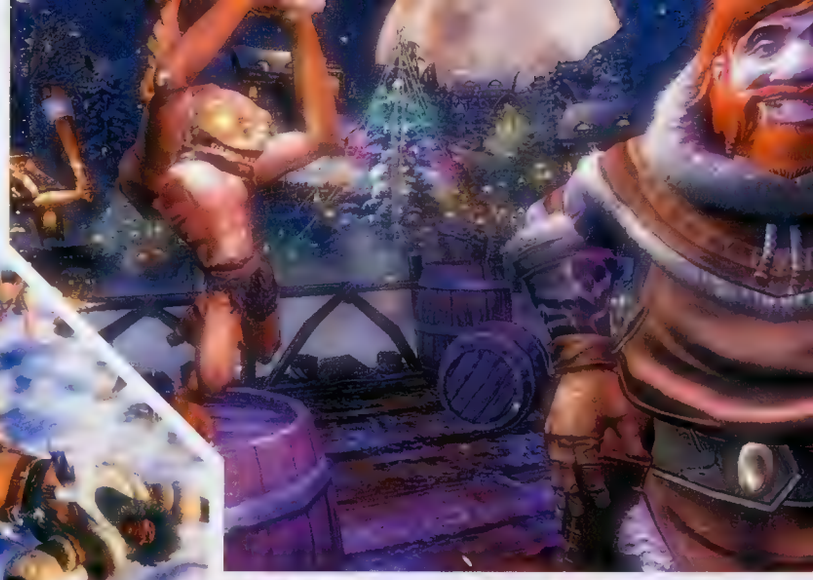
The Empire's genetically modified Storm Trooper will charge through minions, taking the battle to the Overlord

Game DNA What makes up the game?

PREVIEW
OVERLORD II



The tranquil Christmas (and all other winter holidays) themed town of Nordburg will never be the same



> "Are you going to go for domination and slavery, or are you going to go for all-out death, scorched earth and destruction?"

» but the PC will use single buttons for attacks, spells and minion commands. The Overlord was pretty clunky to control in the first game, and while he's much better at combat now, your minions are still your primary weapons, and thankfully their AI has also been improved.

They can also now ride mounts that enhance their core abilities. Apart from the wolves, mounts in the game have to be earned by defeating big boss creatures such as the massive Spider Queen and Fire Salamander. The Brown's wolves let them charge into enemies and jump over gaps that minions can't traverse, Red minions have fire Salamanders and can throw fireballs while running and gunning to avoid being hit by ranged attacks, while the Greens have spiders that can climb walls, which Triumph promises will open up a whole new vista of puzzles.

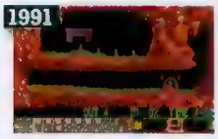
With the minions now sporting such a huge range of new abilities, the developer took a closer look at how the Overlord himself could be improved, both conceptually and as part of the gameplay. A problem with the first *Overlord* for many players was that, while the minions were anarchic children that you came to love as they murderously did your bidding, the Overlord was occasionally a bit of a sap. When he was bad, he was very bad, but when he was good – well, that was the problem, wasn't it? What was the point of being the devil himself, leading a troop of crazed, rampaging goblins, if you ended up being a goody-two-shoes errand boy? It jibes the overall concept of being a powerful evil Overlord. "A big criticism in *Overlord* was that sometimes you just weren't evil enough, at times it was almost as if you played a good guy," admits Sas, "In *Overlord II* we have a new Tyranny meter, which shows what sort of evil Overlord you are."

This time the choices aren't between good and bad, but evil and even more evil. "Are you going to go for domination and slavery or are you going to go for all-out death, scorched earth and destruction?" Overlords with a destructive bent take on fiery demonic features with glowing red armour, while the more domineering sort have a cold, hard-edged blue look to better reflect their evil nature. As well as affecting the story, the world is now populated with citizens, slaves and additional characters in the game that'll react to how evil you play.

Even more importantly, this time around the Overlord's magic is tied directly into the Tyranny system, and all his spells have a domineering or destructive mode. Players can choose either version of a spell, depending on how long the spell button is held down, releasing it early for domination effects or keeping it held down for its destructive incarnation. The 'Evil Presence' spell, for example, is a bit like Force Lightning, enveloping an enemy and holding him in place to be easily ripped apart by the minions or subduing him to your evil will. If the spell button is held down too long, however, the power of your magic disintegrates him. Having a destructive alignment will make the destruction effect stronger and casting time shorter, but the trade-off is that the domination effect will be weaker, so you'll be less able to subdue your enemies and vice versa. Our favourite spell was the Minion spell, with which you can grab a hapless minion and, infusing it with power, chuck it like a missile at your enemies. Lob a Brown minion and he'll knock down enemies, toss a Red one and he'll set enemies alight, panicking them

Minions in disguise can mingle with Empire citizens, at least until its time to attack

Evolution of... An Overlord



1991

» ***Lemmings*** DMA Design's minion concept was far more righteous

2001

» ***Pikmin*** Shigeru Miyamoto's cutesy and clever strategy adventure.

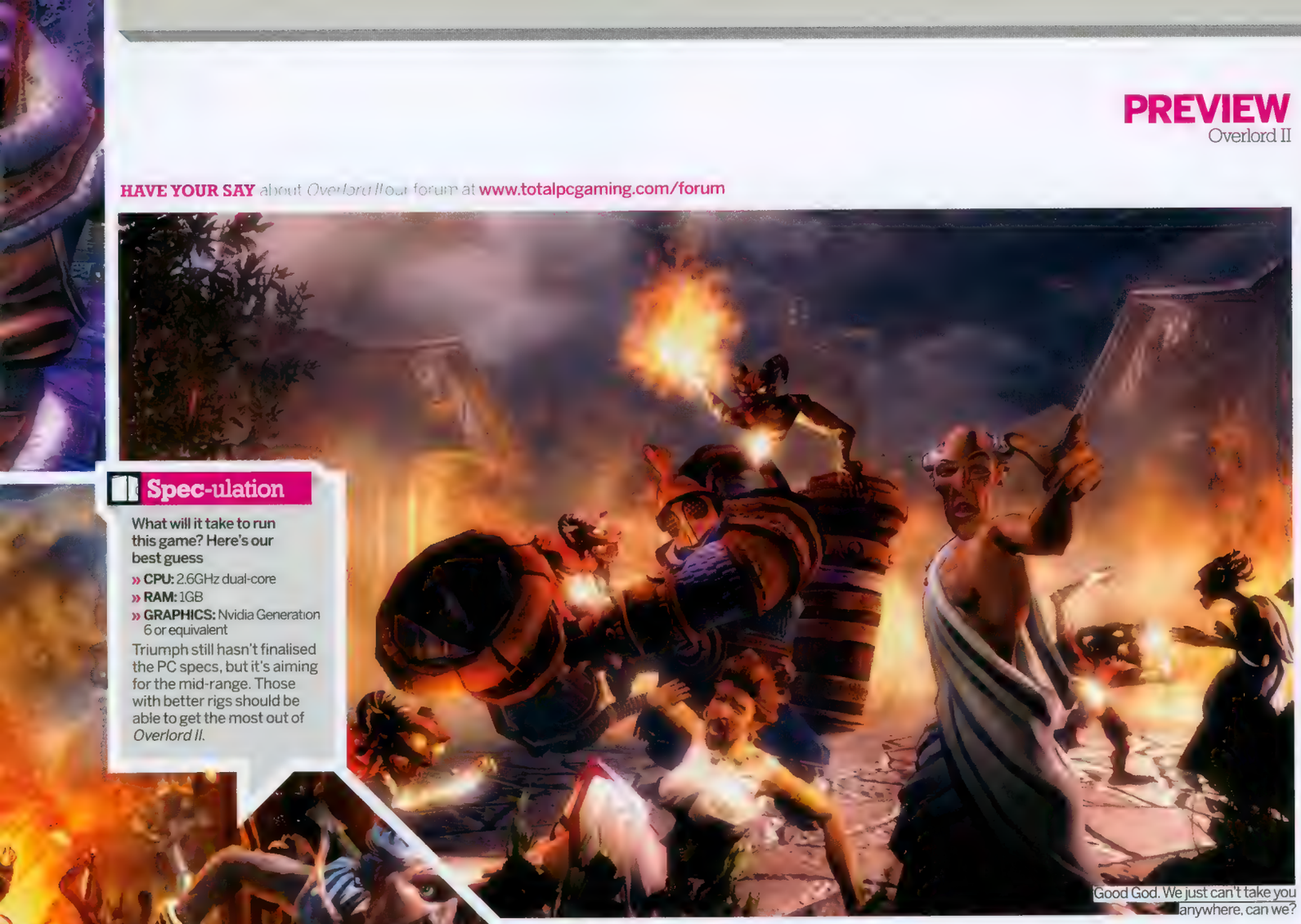
2007

» ***Overlord*** The orginal outing of the ragtag minion horde and their master.

2007

» ***Overlord: Raising Hell*** The expansion pack for Overlord.

HAVE YOUR SAY about *Overlord II* our forum at www.totalpcgaming.com/forum



Good God. We just can't take you anywhere, can we?

Spec-ulation

What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess

- **CPU:** 2.6GHz dual-core
- **RAM:** 1GB
- **GRAPHICS:** Nvidia Generation 6 or equivalent

Triumph still hasn't finalised the PC specs, but it's aiming for the mid-range. Those with better rigs should be able to get the most out of *Overlord II*.

and breaking their foundation. Use the destructive version of the spell and you'll sacrifice the poor but willing minion, drawing health or mana from it. More destructive Overlords will find it difficult to aim the minion throw due to the shorter window of opportunity, but if you like to wade in to dispatch your enemies yourself, it'll often be handy to sacrifice a minion to gain health.

Dividing the spells in this way meant that slightly different versions of missions will face destructive or domineering Overlords, although the objectives and story remain the same. "When you get to a town, we measure your tyranny level, and all the people you face on that mission (and also some of the puzzles and gameplay mechanics), will be matched to your tyranny level and spell set, because spells are needed to get through levels," says lead level designer Joost Blatter.

Making a welcome return in *Overlord II* is your Tower, which serves as the game's hub, enabling you to return to previously explored areas to harvest more gold and life essences for your diabolical purposes. Located in the new dark underground domain of the Netherworld, the tower will evolve as you progress through the game, becoming more sinister and magnificent as your dark power grows. From your throne you can choose quests and receive audiences from your enslaved chattels, with the option of opening a pit and plunging the hapless penitent to their doom. Ensconced in the throne room is your minion minstrel, who recites humorous poems about your exploits as you progress through the game. By popular demand, Triumph has added a new feature: Minion resurrection. So if you miss a particular minion, you can find his grave and bring your favourite back to life by sacrificing ten other minions.

Your private quarters are described to us slyly as 'your Overlord crib' where your mistresses live, and being an evil Overlord you'll get to have three on the go at once. There's Kelda, your childhood friend from Nordburg, a bored Empire socialite called Juno and Faye, the former fairy Queen who becomes bloodthirsty and corrupt once 'persuaded' to join you in the Tower. They constantly bicker with each other, but if you can buy enough presents to placate them, they will come together to give you 'a big surprise' involving all three of them. Can't imagine what that could be!

Overlord II looks set to massively expand on the original concept, with enough toys to keep the most fidgety minions occupied and happy. The version of the game we played seemed fairly polished for a game only 50 per cent complete, and the developer promises that there'll be a great many more surprises, including head-to-head multiplayer in the finished game. But to be honest, the simple joy of a minion adoringly calling us Master while he bludgeons a baby seal to death has us all excited. Sound kind of sick? Don't blame us, blame Triumph.

Sam Bandah

Complete-o-meter 50%

Just how finished is this game?

***Overlord II* is a slick, sick work in progress, although not all the new gameplay mechanics and features are playable. Best to work those minions harder, Codemasters...**

PREVIEW
EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

Empire's Road To Independance campaign is entry-level *Total War* suitable for series noobs

Release date **6 February**

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

Rocket ships, bomb ketches and scurvy: Empire's multiplayer sea battles make history fun

Info **GENRE** Historical TBS/RTS **DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly **PUBLISHER** Sega **WEB** www.sega.co.uk/empire

- The naval battle system is very easy to pick up
- Naval units are as varied as land-based units
- Multiplayer battles are seriously intense

Hot or not?

- Big visual effects will require big system overheads
- Multiplayer via Steam is new ground for *Total War*
- Online naval multiplayer battles are also untested

Sending three units into battle in any other *Total War* game would most likely be suicide, but this is our *Empire: Total War* naval battle hands-on, and each one is a frigate, manned by a crew of sailors, defended by marines and flanked by around 50 12-36-pound cannons. They might be a smaller ship-of-the-line, but they're the pitbulls of the sea: fast and ferocious. We've also got backup in the form of another trio of floating mini-muscle from our allies, the Dutch. Seeing as our armaments are evenly matched with the flotilla of the scummy Spanish and French ships before us, this confrontation will boil down to the best command. But this is nothing like a traditional land-based *Total War* conflict.

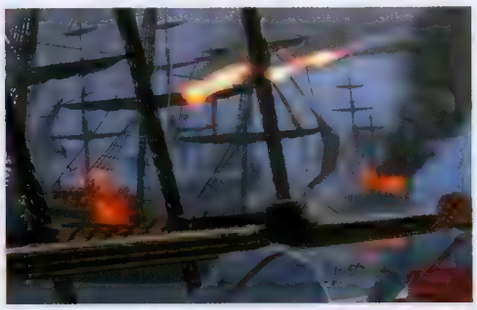
"One of the very first things that became apparent was people's familiarity with the problems of naval battles," lead designer Jamie Ferguson told us. "The fact that, for example, you can't sail into the wind: that obviously has a lot of gameplay implications. In the real world, two ships can get separated and drift off for several hours, perhaps several days, before getting back into an engagement. You can't do that in a game, and that was one of the first things, in terms of reality, that bit the dust. What we did was give people a very slow progression into the wind, which means you don't have to be a sailing expert to play, and you don't have to know about tacking and boxhauling, cutting against the wind."

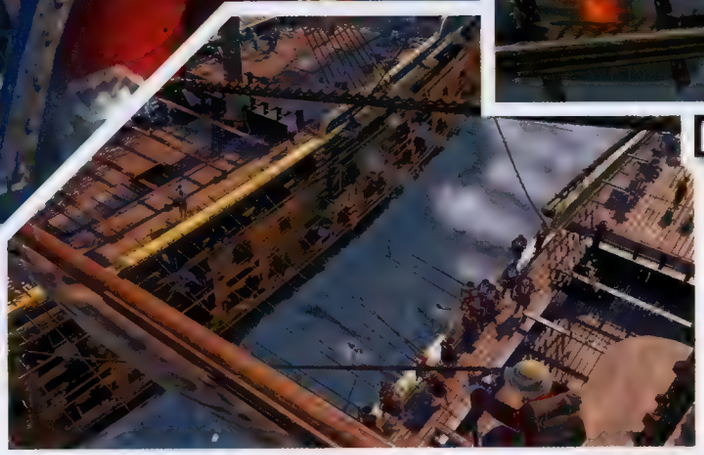
"Naval battles are very different in that your attack strength is in a different direction from the way you're moving," said battle AI programmer Richard Bull, "You really have to think about how you're moving your ships, whereas in the land battles you're focused more on choosing the appropriate target and making sure you're hitting it in the right place."

The significance of wind cannot be overstated here. This will soon be impressed upon you once your sails have been fried by the incendiary-firing rocket ship or your masts toppled, leaving you straining at your mouse in an effort to turn a ship around. One of the first things we learned to do was take advantage of chain-shot, which rips through sails and leaves your enemies floundering haplessly around while you blast their hull with a broadside of cannon fire. Historically, big ships weren't as susceptible to being sunk by others, so the common tactic in the 18th Century was to cripple the enemy and then board. The same strategy is often applicable in *Empire*, and having focused the field of fire from all three of our ships, maiming a Spanish vessel, we moved to closer range to allow our marines to pepper the decks with grapeshot. This doesn't damage the ship, but it can have a devastating effect on enemy morale as the helpless crew are picked off. The goal here is to shatter morale, force your opponent into surrendering and grant you a much more profitable victory than sending the ship and its crew to Davy Jones' locker. What surprised us about *Empire*'s naval battle system was just how accessible it was. It's a matter of keeping an eye on the wind and timing your movement so that either broadside is ready to fire and perpendicular to your enemy whenever you're in range. The strategies involved with multiple units, however, are far from simple, even when using conventional 18th Century warships. Those land battle micromanagement skills will come in handy here, especially when several different ships-of-the-line and support vessels are involved. Jamie described some of the naval units we can expect to encounter at sea:

"Besides the Rocket ship we have First Rates, things like HMS Victory. Then there's the Spanish Santissima Trinidad, a ship that had 136 guns on board... that was actually massively unwieldy and got taken out by three frigates because she was so difficult to sail. But anyone who got caught in her broadside was just matchwood. Then you move on down through the second, third and fourth rates to frigates, sloops and bomb ketches – these are a lot of fun. Bomb ketches are basically small ships with a couple of mortars on board. Although their primary role was to shoot at land-based targets, they were occasionally used in sea battles to catch someone by surprise. A mortar shell landing on your deck – it was one of the weakest parts of your ship, so you can imagine the damage it would do."

Game DNA What makes up the game?





Spec-ulation

What will it take to run this game? Here's our best guess

- **CPU:** 2.4GHz single-core processor
- **RAM:** 1GB (2GB Vista)
- **GRAPHICS:** 256MB DX9 compatible

That's the bare minimum. It's scalable, but full visuals in busy naval battles will need the kind of muscle that earns respect, if not bragging rights.

Our multiplayer naval battle ended a rousing success, routing all of the French, two of the Spanish vessels and capturing the third with zero losses for our team. You can't always put this down to superior seamanship though, even matching unit for unit there are many means of getting an edge over the enemy. "Copper-bottoming makes your ships move through water faster because they don't get fouled with kelp and so on; that will also have a campaign map effect by increasing the range of your ships. There's sauerkraut and limes, and they keep your crew happy because they're not all dying of scurvy. One of the things that doesn't get covered a lot when people talk about Trafalgar, for example, was that the Spanish and French crews were almost all suffering from scurvy. The British crews, on the other hand, were eating meat every day and had fresh veg shipped out to them on station. As a result their health was higher and went into battle with a much more positive frame of mind."

You heard it here first. *Total War* fans looking at long-term incarceration with Empire come February, remember your greens.

Ben Biggs

> "The Spanish Santissima Trinidad had 136 guns... anyone who got caught in her broadside was matchwood"

Complete-o-meter 90%

Just how finished is this game?

We half-expected the slippage *Empire* has experienced in the last year – it is a big game after all – but with the polish we've seen recently, 6 February is almost a dead cert.

PREVIEWS
RELEASE LISTINGS

ON THE RADAR

Gaze into the future of PC games – no crystal ball required

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» Warhammer 40K: Dawn Of War 2
www.dawnofwar2.com

TBC
» Resident Evil 5
www.residentevil.com

17/0
» Tom Clancy's H.A.W.X
hawxgame.uk.ubi.com

20
» The Sims 3
thesims3.ea.com

13/02
» Men Of War
www.1cpublishing.eu/game/men-of-war

13/02
» King's Bounty: The Legend
www.kingsbounty.com

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» CSI: New York
www.ubi.com/uk

06/01
» Empire: Total War
www.totalwar.com

06/01
» Silent Hill: Homecoming
http://uk.games.konami-europe.com

30
» Mafia 2
www.mafia2game.com

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» Aion: The Tower Of Eternity
eu.aiononline.com

TBC
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26/1
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www.darkfallonline.com

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» The Lord Of The Rings: Conquest
www.pandemicstudios.com

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» F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin
projectorigin.warnerbros.com

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» Wolfenstein
www.wolfenstein.com

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» Just Cause 2
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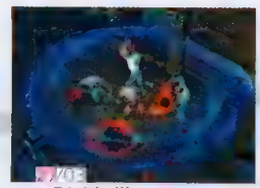

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» Diablo III
www.blizzard.com/diablo3

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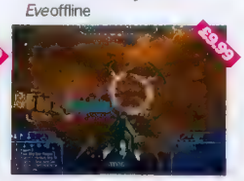

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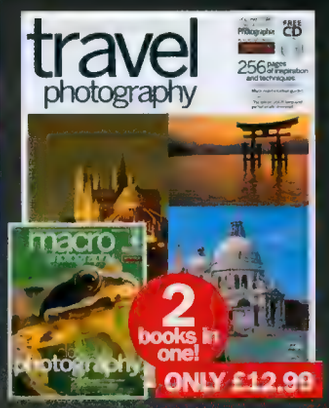

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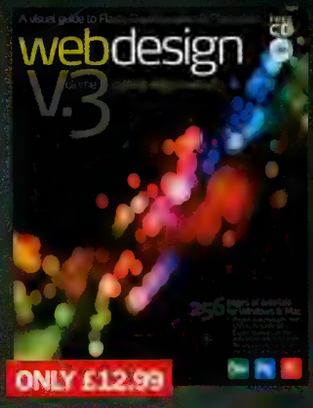

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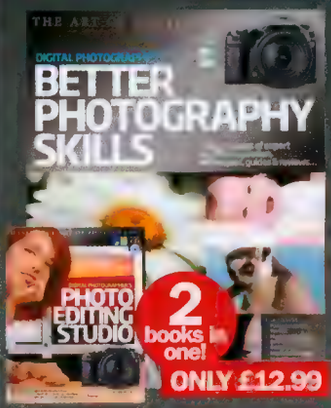

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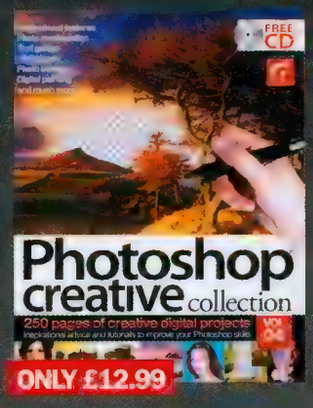

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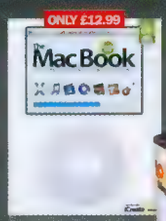

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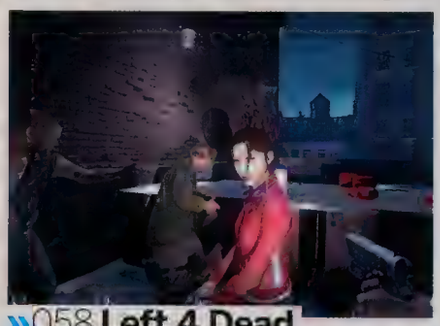
Not rubbish: read exactly how not rubbish it is in our big review



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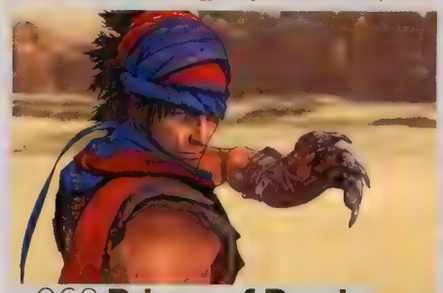

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HOW WE REVIEW

APART FROM PLAYING THEM OF COURSE...

» Five out of ten is a mundane stroll through an ordinary park, ten is a ride like none you've ever known, while zero is the wasted piece of life you wish you had back. We also benchmark and take max/min detail comparison screens, which provides all the information you'll need when considering a purchase based on our reviews.

The brilliantly named Coquette. This baby is fast. Really bloody fast

In three words **Sublime. Intricate. Definitive.**

GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

PC gamers finally get to find out what all the fuss is about

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Sandbox
DEVELOPER Rockstar North | **PUBLISHER** Rockstar Games | **WEB** www.rockstargames/IV

***GTA IV* was not created by humans.** Having searched for a reasonable answer as to how the finished article came about, the intricacies of which are both dumbfounding in complexity and Hubble-like in polish, it's the only conclusion we can come to. Pictured in our minds are an advanced race of game developers, possibly with comically conical heads that function to protect their enlarged cerebrums. One bemonocled specimen sits patiently describing the physical characteristics of mailbox versus car. Another retasks a satellite to follow the daily movements of an Eastern European wideboy.

The *Grand Theft Auto* series, of course, all began on PC, and it was really only after the successful conversion of some of the earlier outings to the PlayStation that the pendulum began to swing in favour of the consoles. Each successive iteration of the series gave rise to a geometric increase in the anticipation felt by its steadily increasing fan base. So this year's release of *GTA IV* on both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 brought with it unprecedented sales and fan fervour.

The premise of the game is, on the face of it, a simple one. A world is created, in this case, Liberty City; a stylised facsimile of New York. In it are a population who walk, drive, eat and sleep their way through the game's day and night cycles. Within this vibrant melee, the conflicts of a family of Eastern European gangsters are played out. The gameplay is simple. Player choice boils down to following your mini-map to your next objective (which in many cases is chosen from a number available) or just cruising around, seeing the sites and maybe beating the odd whore. Once a mission is completed, usually with a combination of driving, shooting or both, then you move onto the next one. But you won't want to do that. No. Instead, you'll stare boss-eyed into your monitor as each layer of inconceivably intricate detail is revealed. *GTA IV* is all about the little things. Because if you break the experience down to just the doing, you're ignoring not only 90 per cent of the work the cone-heads at Rockstar have achieved, but all that rudely yanks the game out of its 'excellent' pigeonhole and stuffs it, kicking and screaming into the one marked 'extraordinary'.

Niko Bellic's reason for stepping off the boat is complex, his background more multi-layered than it may first appear, and once off the boat, you'll have scant idea of what Niko is in for. Early missions act as an extended tutorial. But even at this stage it's the little things that begin to impress themselves upon you most. For instance, the game's physics. Using the ubiquitous Havok engine would at first point to nothing revelatory coming your way. Its implementation in *GTA IV*, however, is inhumanly perfect. And when it's number-crunching alongside NaturalMotion's Euphoria engine, the overall effect is so staggeringly accomplished that you'll come close to ignoring it altogether. What better compliment could we offer than to say that it's reached a level of transparency at which it almost passes us by unnoticed.

Euphoria governs player and NPC movement, or more specifically, how they react when, say, Niko meets oncoming car, Niko in car meets oncoming pedestrians, or when bat-wielding Niko meets oncoming bastard. It determines that, in addition to the prefabricated animations of the game's malcontents, any other physical forces acting upon them will have a realistic impact as if that character were struggling against said forces with every muscle in their body. This can be witnessed when Niko is so catatonically drunk that all sense of balance is lost. It can be appreciated as he

REVIEW
GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

Second opinion

» It's *GTA IV*. On the PC. With better graphics. Thank you God. That said, you need serious hardware to get it working well, though we expect a performance patch to appear in time.
Russell Barnes

Clever, subtle, beautiful, immersive, cool and immense. We've still got a sack-full of superlatives left after all that lot.

Upside/downside

It's not, strictly speaking, a PC game in the true PC game sense. As a result, things didn't go well when we attempted to control the game via mouse and keyboard.

» leans into a cornering sprint. It can be felt at the painful terminus of a joyride as he bursts through the windscreen of his recently-jacked Blista Compact.

Outside of the main mission structure, there's just so much to keep the player occupied. Gradually unlocking each of the game's islands reveals a simply vast play area. There are many games in which the size of the world is highlighted by its developer as its key feature. Rockstar makes no such boasts. It doesn't need to. Alarms should always go off when the first detail you hear in regard to any game is that you'll be able to explore 50,000 square kilometres of wilderness. Or a million cubic light-years of space. Simply put, these games are inevitably empty. That by creating so much virtual carpet the developer forgot to add the furniture. Vacuuming up the missions then becomes a featureless tour-de-chore. *GTA IV* is the very antithesis of that notion. While the world of Liberty City is huge, the genesis of its design did not evidently begin with a question of scale. Instead, it appears to have been generated based on need; a container designed once the quantity of that which it needs to hold is already known. It is fit for purpose, and as such players will find themselves endlessly wrapped in its rich fabric of microcosmic events instead of crying out for something to happen in its sonorous space.

And us PC lot are lucky people indeed. Because what we have here is the *Grand Theft Auto IV*. It may have been over half a year since its original console release, but by

» First impressions last a gameplay snapshot

Welcome to the best version of one of the best games of the year.

Nostalgia is already being felt for a game we only finished six months ago. Remarkable.

Nostalgia is subsiding and, weirdly, the whole experience is beginning to feel fresh.

We know how it ends. We haven't scratched the surface. We're staying for the long haul.

"The game is yanked out of its 'excellent' pigeonhole and stuffed into the one marked 'extraordinary'"

heck it's been worth the wait. The Xbox 360 and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the PlayStation 3 are truly beginning to show their patched-up old underthings these days when it comes to pushing polys. And while keeping your rig up to date is certainly a more expensive prospect, it's not often that we see a game that proves once and for all that we are far better off staying atop the technology food-chain.

While still brilliant, and from a technical standpoint, a tremendous achievement, the console outings were limited. Vast draw distances could be achieved, but only at the cost of street furniture, cars and pedestrians rudely popping in a hundred yards up the road. Well, unless your machine can only handle the still-brilliant minimum settings, these issues have vanished. This PC version can be considered a kind of director's cut in many ways, too. The limitations of DVD9's storage capacity in regard to the Xbox 360 saw to it that some content was cut. The PlayStation 3, having no such excuses with its integrated Blu-ray player, was equally held back by the politics of mutual exclusivity, or rather lack thereof. The upshot is that we began to notice all of the gubbins you'd normally associate with a director's cut DVD. Extended scenes coming in the form of an extended radio selection.

Whether you're just cruising around in your latest stolen sports coupe, or traversing the city to a mission objective, you'll want to listen to the radio. Every possible taste in music barring Belgian acid skiffle is catered for. In addition to whole new radio stations and, what seems to us at least to be extended versions of the game's airwave repertoire, the game features the ability to put together your own playlist of songs from your hard drive. We'd be very surprised if you didn't find at least one new favourite in the game's existing library (in our case *Edge Of Seventeen* by Stevie Nicks), but we also appreciate that some people are simply too stuck in their ways to take on new stuff. The feature's inclusion is welcome however open you have a tendency to keep your mindedness.

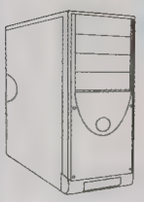
But *GTA IV*'s ability on PC to treat you to a spectacle that no console owner could dream to approach doesn't stop with advantage taken of limitless storage or musical customisation. Also included in the package, you'll find a fully-featured video editor. With the function switched on it will automatically record the last half-minute or so of gameplay. When you see or do something remarkable, you can go into the menus and save the clip. Being as it's saved as a set of three-dimensional animation co-ordinates, rather than simply as video means you can cut it together with other saved clips and even place the cameras where you please. But it goes even deeper. Why not add your own soundtrack, subtitles, transitions and all manner of professional effects? The silliness that can be achieved is beyond the words of a mere mortal, so instead, be sure to pop in next issue's DVD to witness this reviewer and his intrepid editor Russell Barnes' lightly inebriated attempts at machinima.

It was easy, especially on the console side of things, to forget just how wonderful a game *GTA IV* was and is. Other landmark titles flooded forward during the great game-tsunami of October/November, inflicting us with a strain of hyperbolistic amnesia. But if anything is of greater compliment to the experience of playing it again a mere six months down the line then it's that, even putting aside the myriad improvements and brand new features in this definitive edition, we still enjoyed simply existing in Liberty City once again. A ten doesn't mean a perfect game; there is no such thing. Instead, it represents a sizeable leap forward in the art of videogames, an unparalleled audio-visual treat and a product with enough cool to freeze hell. This... is *GTA IV*.

Dan Howdle

Loads of physics and wild explosions make for an exhilarating ride!

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU Intel Core 2 Quad 2.4GHz, AMD Phenom X3 2.1GHz
RAM 2 GB XP, 2.5 GB Vista
GRAPHICS 512MB Nvidia 8600/512MB ATI 3870

We say

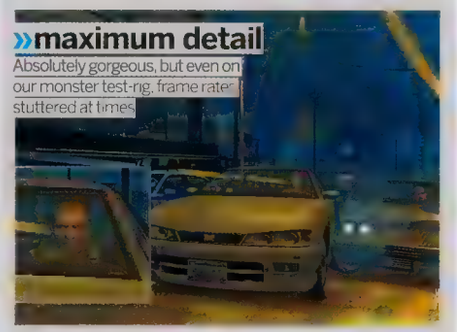
PC gamers are getting a better version of a very power-hungry game. Expect to do okay with the above recommendations, but the more power you can feed it, the better off you'll be.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

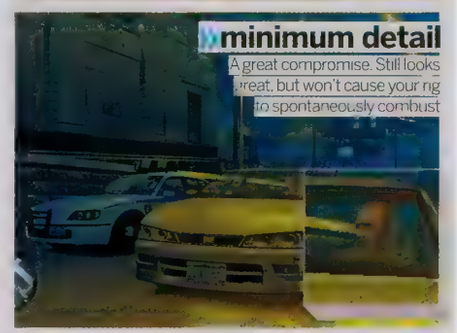
»maximum detail

Absolutely gorgeous, but even on our monster test-rig, frame rate stuttered at times.



»minimum detail

A great compromise. Still looks great, but won't cause your rig to spontaneously combust

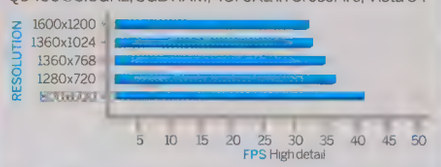


»Technical tip

First port of call should be to lower draw distance. After that, traffic volume and shadow detail appear to bring the greatest benefit to performance.

»fps vs resolution

Q9450@3.6GHz, 8GB RAM, 4870X2 in CrossFire, Vista 64



Verdict 10

There hasn't been a better game this year. A fact we need not impress on you further. Just buy it.

Once you call the lift the undead start busting through the walls and ceiling

In three words **Brutal. Bloody. Brilliance.**

LEFT 4 DEAD

"When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth"

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £19.97 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** First-person shooter **DEVELOPER** Valve | **PUBLISHER** EA | **WEB** www.l4d.com

You've got to hand it to Valve. It's probably the only developer on the planet that could have made *Left 4 Dead*. On paper the game reads like some kind of half-baked, harebrained *Half-Life 2* mod. The kind of bedroom project that would never 'make it' because it only has four one-hour missions each with plotless stories flimsily based around a gaggle of hackneyed Seventies zombie movies.

'Let's get this straight. You shoot your way through a bunch of nondescript zombies, relying entirely on AI and the odd scripted event?'

'Yeah, and all of the character's attributes are identical and you've only got a few weapons, a Molotov and a pipe bomb to play with.'

'Right. Er, thanks for the pitch. Close the door on your way out.'

'Wait... did we mention we're using a four-year-old engine to make it?'

'[click] Security to the board room...'

The simple fact is, at any other dev house with anybody else's money *Left 4 Dead* wouldn't have made it off the drawing board. At Valve, however, these kinds of ideas aren't just born, they're incubated, pampered, burped and in time they grow into solid granite monoliths of modern games design. We could waste hours mulling whether it's pure vision, the simplicity of the Source engine or the backing of largest digital download service on the planet that allows them to take these kinds of design risks and get away with it, but the net result is that *Left 4 Dead* doesn't just work, it redefines the online FPS.

Its less-is-more approach is actually quite a refreshing break from the recent trend in first-person shooters too. There's no 30-hour convoluted quest to contend with, no weapon degradation, no topographic map reading and certainly no four-legged friend to try and keep alive – it's run-and-gun all the way, with the odd pant-changing pit stop thrown in to keep your nerves from burning out. It's the kind of fast-paced quick-fix action that puts us in mind of the past masters like *Doom* and *Serious Sam*. There is wave after wave of undead enemies between you and the next classic zombie apocalypse scenario, and all you've got is a health pack strapped to your back and three other people to keep you alive. While the inclusion of co-op multiplayer really makes this game work, it's actually the nature of the AI that keeps you coming back for more.

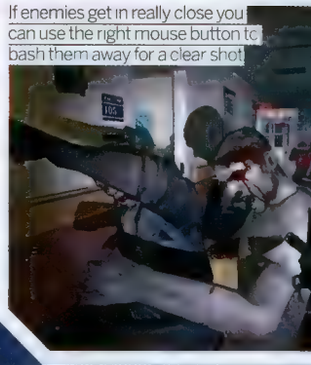
While it would have been easy to have scripted the zombies to catch you and your online compadres at various bottlenecks during your escape, Valve's AI Director ensures no two play-throughs are ever the same by constantly monitoring your progress and dealing you just the right number of enemies at just the right time to keep you on the brink of despair. One pass through the hospital lobby might go painlessly enough, yet the next zombies will drop down through holes in the ceiling, climb through windows and beat

The hospital is classic zombie B-movie stuff. Its tight corridors make it easy to shoot fellow survivors

Second opinion

» Versus mode is where *L4D* really comes into its own, but even with AI companions on campaign mode it's still a blast. It's a refreshing change from the current FPS trend.

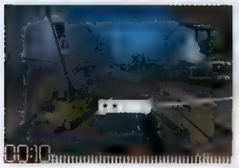
Ben Biggs



If enemies get in really close you can use the right mouse button to bash them away for a clear shot

You're down, but you're not out. Use your pistol for pot-shots while you're waiting to be saved

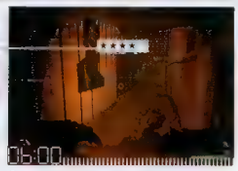
» First impressions last a gameplay snapshot



The first few minutes are chaos, largely spent shooting your mates as much as the zombies.

As you approach the end of the first chapter, you're figuring out how to use the pipe bombs.

Having completed a couple of levels, the Versus Mode is now calling.



Some impressive team tactics and avoiding the Witch ensures everyone gets out alive.

> "While the inclusion of co-op multiplayer really makes this game work, it's the nature of the AI that keeps you coming back for more"

down doors until you're surrounded by utter chaos. The inclusion of four uber-undead 'boss' enemies also throws in a certain level of unpredictability. These guys can wreak serious havoc by vomiting zombie-attracting bile, wrapping their 50-foot tongues around your neck, pouncing from great distances or – worst of all – throwing a car at your head or punching you 20 feet off the top of a high building.

We found ourselves moving gingerly through an abandoned and boarded-up township actually whispering the all clear over the built-in voice chat as we pressed on toward the safe-room. You make allies quickly when you're online in *L4D*, because without them you're toast.

In fact, the game has a cunning knack of completely drawing you in to the point of acting out the classic zombie-flick dos and don'ts. From peering through windows with a torch to shrieking 'get 'em off me!' or 'just go on without me – get to that chopper!' at the top of your lungs, you'll be drawn in to the action. It's beyond multiplayer, it's role-playing in the ultimate hammed-up zombie-fest.

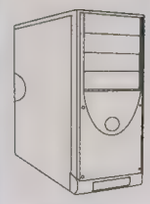
That's enough Valve-sex for one review, though; it's clear from the score that *L4D* isn't entirely perfect. It's as polished a finished product we've seen for some time, but there are a couple of niggles that, at their worst, can bring a premature end to what should always be a late-night session. The first and most obvious would be the ageing visuals. There's little doubt that Source is in desperate need of a face-lift, and preferably a DirectX 10 one. While we're sure it'll come in time (likely with the release of *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*), Valve would have done very well to use the development of *L4D* to dust down any technical engine tweaks by way of a warm-up for its biggest intellectual property later this year.

Weaknesses in graphics are almost always forgivable, but when it's the network interface of an almost entirely network-dependent game it's another matter. It's pretty clear Valve decided to strip back the server interface to help maintain the immediacy of the gameplay, but for our money it went too far. Fair enough – scanning through endless reams of server lists and filtering them to preference is about as fun as it sounds, but there must be a middle ground. While we quite like the lobby system for connecting to games that are yet to start, we would rather have a clunky interface with a decent level of visibility than be indiscriminately connected to servers in our rough geographic location with only a meagre list of gameplay variables to go on.

Still, *L4D* is probably the most fun we've had with our PCs since Valve's last four-hour 'epic' FPS, you know – the one with only one gun and one enemy. How the hell do those guys do it?

Russell Barnes

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU Pentium 4 3GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS ATI 9600/Nvdia 6600 (Shader Model 2.0), 128MB Direct X9.0c
OTHER Internet connection

We say

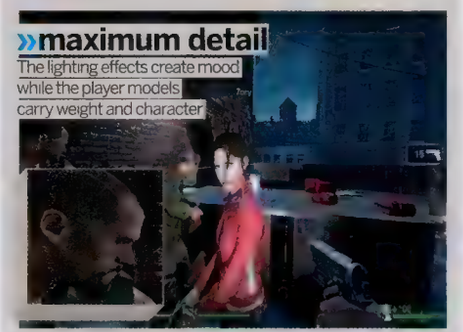
Since the engine behind *L4D* has been with us since 2004, you don't need a stellar setup to manage half-decent frame rates. Double the RAM, throw in a Shader Model 3.0 card (7600 or X1600 or better) and you're laughing.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

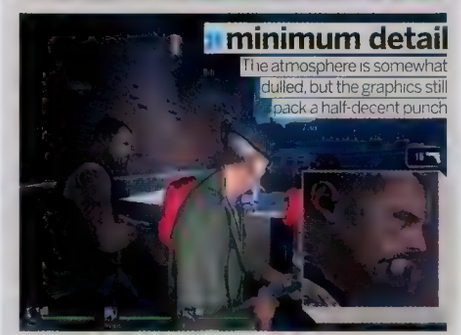
»maximum detail

The lighting effects create mood while the player models carry weight and character



»minimum detail

The atmosphere is somewhat dulled, but the graphics still pack a half-decent punch



»Technical tip

There's the usual array of Source engine tweakery here. If you're struggling, make sure AA and AF are off and you disable the HDR effects.

»fps vs resolution

Core 2 Duo 3GHz, 2GB RAM, 8800GTX, Vista 64-bit

Verdict

Its bravery and stunning execution deserve plaudits while its addictive nature deserves a health warning.

9

In three words **Beautiful. Simplified. Safe.**

PRINCE OF PERSIA

Persia has gone mainstream and minimal, but has the Prince lost his regal authority?

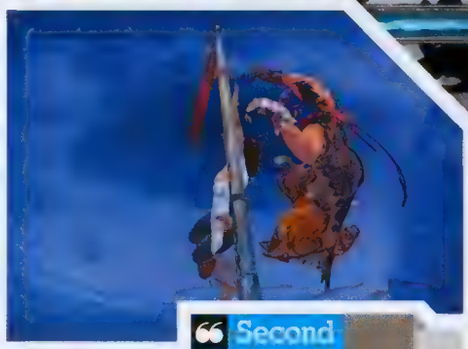
Details

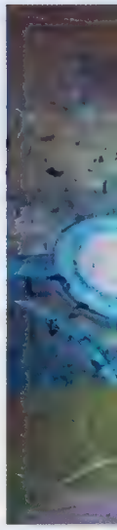
PRICE £29.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.46 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Platformer/fighter
DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal | **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft | **WEB** www.princeofpersiagame.com

Game developers find themselves in a difficult position these days. A new game in a long-lived series, such as *Prince Of Persia*, comes with some weighty expectations. Whether these demands stem from the increasingly discerning gamer's opinion of what a 'reboot' should be, or from the lofty claims developers habitually make about the revolution its game will herald a year before screenshots even appear, it's hard to say. In all likelihood, it's a combination of things, but the build-up is often very difficult to live up to, and the all-new *Prince Of Persia* struggles to meet its own party line.

Essentially this is a reboot of a reboot, and as the series gets further from its origins, the cult following is bound to get left behind. Indeed, there seems to be a subtle intention for this to happen in *Prince Of Persia*, with Ubisoft carefully attempting to shed the stalwarts who obsessed over the *Sands Of Time* trilogy and bring in a new breed of casual or FPS-enthused gamer. Depending on which side of the fence you sit, this makes the Prince's second reboot either a good or bad experience.

It was a deliberation whether to compare this game to the *Sands Of Time* trilogy, but in the end it's the *Sands Of Time*, *Warrior Within* and *The Two Thrones* that have built the franchise to this level, and it's perfectly reasonable that the legions of fans will want to know how this reincarnation holds up. So that's precisely what we're going to do, and although it's a harsh and unforgiving jury for this new game to face, it's a comparison that must be made to really tell the story of the all-new Prince.



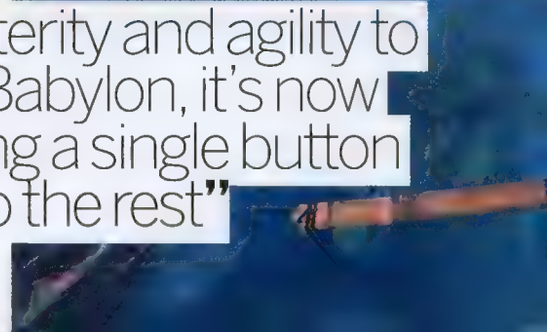


Second opinion

» Marmite game alert: I actually enjoyed the Prince's (admittedly facile) wall-crawling. Combat is lacking, but watching the Prince swing from precarious ledge to overhang is mesmerising.

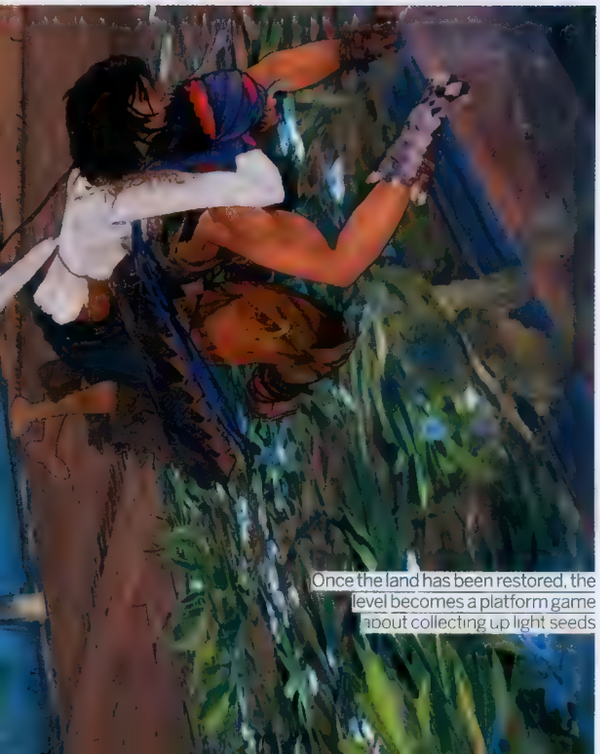
Ben Biggs

Get used to seeing this screen – Prince says he'll never get used to it, but you certainly will



"Where it once took dexterity and agility to find a way up and over Babylon, it's now a simple case of mashing a single button and letting the Prince do the rest"

Fighting, like the acrobatics, benefits from controlled button mashing. Not very satisfying, but works nicely using the fully supported Xbox 360 controller



Once the land has been restored, the level becomes a platform game about collecting up light seeds

It doesn't take a particularly sharp eye to spot that the first major difference is in the Prince himself. A reasonable analogy to draw between this new Prince and the one we got to know in the *Sands Of Time* is a comparison between the Batman we saw in *The Dark Knight* and Adam West's camp rendition of the Sixties. The new Prince was taught to act in the Adam West school of child-friendly heroes, in contrast to the overly dark and brooding misery guts of *The Dark Knight/ Sands Of Time*. There's nothing wrong with either, to be quite fair, but personal taste doesn't easily allow us to enjoy both. Whether you like it superficial and wisecracking or dark and humourless will determine which Prince of Persia you prefer.

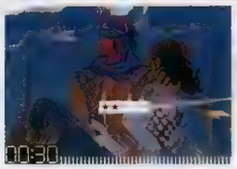
Neither is a suburban, all-American white male's accent technically any less acceptable than the pseudo-thespian English lilt of the previous Prince, but there's something disappointingly 'lowest common denominator' about the macho one-liners the Prince now speaks in. His attitude is no longer one of urgency or capable vengeance, but of a lamentably one-dimensional, Hollywood-born, 'wrong place, wrong time' all-round action hero.

To complete his Americanisation, the Prince obviously needed a female lead, and the enigmatic Princess Elika was recruited for him to bandy one-liners off and to spark a little superficial sexual tension. She has other roles in the game – important ones – but it seems pretty clear from her introduction (thrown into the thrice-muscled arms of the all-new Prince) that she's there to provide a feminine springboard designed entirely to accentuate our hero's latent masculinity.

This all-new, wisecracking royal (who, come to think of it, doesn't give any impression or clue as to his actual imperial legacy, so it's difficult to place this game within the series' timeline) has been made over in more than just personality and accent. Flowing coats and headgear add irrefutable flair to his signature gymnastics – drawing an emphasising whip of blue and red behind him as he performs his impossible feats. His deftly wielded knife has been replaced by a full-on, ostentatious broadsword accompanied by a gauntlet that allows the Prince to grab hold of sheer rock as well as his enemies' flesh.

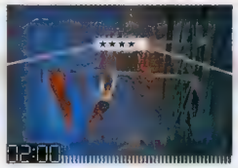
His attire presents us with an unrecognisable version of his previous, 'ethnic' self. The Prince can now change his costume as much as he likes, which is great for the game, but pale skin tones, light hair and bright blue eyes? Does this really look like a man who would now come from Iran? True enough, this is all a matter of aesthetics, and games have no obligation to adhere to reality, yet the extremity of the main character's Americanisation speaks volumes about Ubisoft's opinion of both the source and the audience. Obviously we don't expect him to

First impressions last a gameplay snapshot

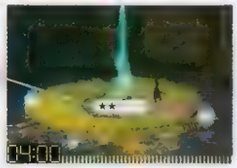


We've met Elika, which is important, and realised Persia was run by butch Americans.

Feelings for Elika are growing, though the acrobatics are more watery than expected.



Oh to meet the real Elika! She moves my world and flies like an angel! The Prince of where?



Running around is a good way to fall in love with Elika, but Prince encourages no such sentiment.

» speak Farsi or Kurdish – that would be severely obtrusive to the English-speaking audience this game is aimed at, but redesigning a Middle Eastern country to meet the Aryan expectations of a Hollywood hero is as unnecessary as it is discourteous, and it subtly taints the game's credibility.

Looking way back into the past when the Prince first appeared on the Apple II and Amiga, it was the eye-wateringly detailed animation and physical puzzle solving that made the game stand out. Naturally, we're not so easily enamoured by clever animation in the current world of 3D visuals and affordable motion capture. But those physical enigmas that Persia's heir constantly finds himself facing are as present as ever, and it's these intelligent, vertiginous access problems that a *Prince Of Persia* game must demonstrate in order to claim its place in this rich lineage.

The *Sands Of Time* introduced the parkour-esque abilities of the Prince, and the way in which they complemented the essential puzzle solving was quite brilliant. While *Prince Of Persia* has undeniably retained and glorified these vital aspects of gameplay that transcend trilogies and reboots, it's also reduced their difficulty. Ubisoft has attempted to make this game more accessible to players who don't necessarily harbour the interest or determination to solve those crucial situations; to bite their lip and take a running leap of faith, or to find a route to the highest point that no one else would have the balls to test.

His acrobatic prowess has been at once enhanced, and at the same time reduced. Walking along a jutting plank, for instance, is now as easy as running along any pathway, while the danger of dancing around at toe-curling heights has been severely curtailed since the Prince can simply grab the wall and glide, gratingly, to safety. Where it once took dexterity and agility to find a way up and over Babylon, it's now a simple case of mashing a single button and letting the Prince do the rest. Leap from a ledge as carelessly as you like – if that's the correct route, and the acrobatics come easily with a few more (not necessarily well-timed) button presses.

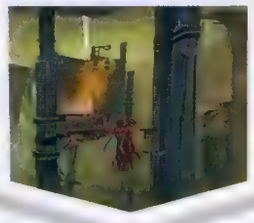
It can make for some pretty entertaining action sequences as you bounce impossibly from wall to wall, swinging, clawing and defying gravity at will. But the sense of danger that such heights once brought is gone, replaced instead by a casual disregard for death since it's now entirely impossible for the Prince of Persia to die.

In many respects this ought to be Elika's game, with the Prince providing a computer-controlled shadow to shore up her athletic prowess, rather than the other way around. She's also a better fleshed-out and far more interesting character than the donkey-obsessed 'Prince', to be honest. The loose storyline is entirely based around her

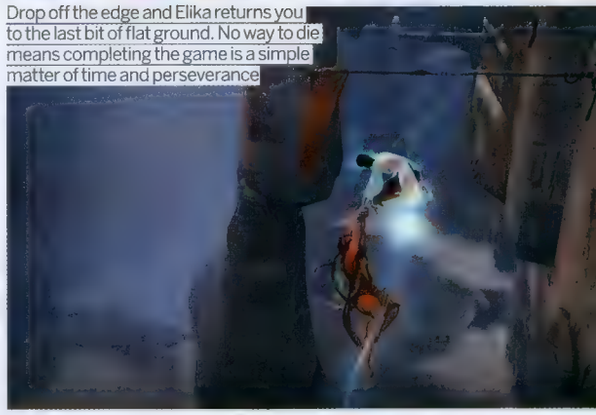
Elika is as fascinating as she is good-looking, just like the scenery. Jumping right in and playing the game is easy and initially rewarding.

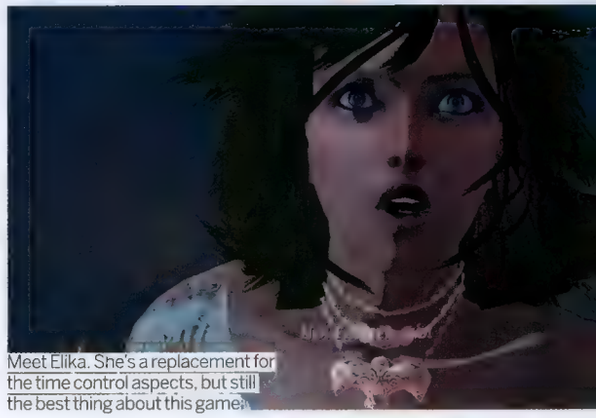
Upside/downside

The Prince is a homogenised and superficial shadow of his former self, just like his acrobatics and life in general. Less, in this case, turns out to be less.



Drop off the edge and Elika returns you to the last bit of flat ground. No way to die means completing the game is a simple matter of time and perseverance





Meet Elika. She's a replacement for the time control aspects, but still the best thing about this game

"Pale skin tones and bright blue eyes? Does this really look like a man who would now come from Iran?"

society's effort to guard an evil, imprisoned entity, which is let loose (inexplicably) by her own father as the Prince just happens to wander past. A weak premise, but it's enough to blight the world and give the Prince and Elika a reason to visit each domain and restore fertility to the land.

But other than the cut-scenes, which are thankfully short and few, she's included purely to substitute the time control aspects of the *Sands Of Time* trilogy – and herein lies the gameplay differences between this *Prince Of Persia* reboot and the last one.

Where death could previously be rewound a few times by a quick-fingered player, Elika (who can fly when it suits her) now jumps in automatically and catches the Prince should he plunge to his death, returning him to the last patch of flat ground to try again. And again, and again. The same happens during combat as she unleashes a spell to save her new sire's life if the enemy wins out. This combat no longer features the stealth aspects we'd come to associate with our beloved Prince, always featuring a simple one-on-one cage match with some easy-to-pick-up combos that button mashing will master within minutes.

Essentially she represents an embodiment of many gameplay aspects we often take for granted (such as the impossible 'double jump'), and in that role she's a breath of fresh gaming air. For gaps too wide to leap, upon command Elika will boost the Prince far enough to make the ledge, and as her powers increase she can shunt him vertically up the walls using her magic, and even take him flying in an utterly cheesy and disjointed third-person aerial sequence.

Yes, the scenery is absolutely gorgeous (assuming you've got the rig to show it), but this new, supposedly 'open world' order isn't the massive selling point Ubisoft has made it out to be. What's really happened is the story has been surgically removed with all the subtlety of a rhino attack – replaced instead by a premise that's loose enough to let you wander the levels at random (though tackling them still means fathoming your own idea of where to semi-logically head next). *Sands Of Time* asked you to (linearly, admittedly) scale the dangerous heights for reasons attached to the excellent plot, while here we find ourselves climbing for climbing's sake; making those beautiful, circuitous environments little more than an extensive playground for the agile Prince.

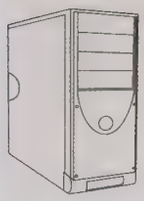
Fans should be suspicious of anyone telling them to forget what they knew (and loved) about previous *Prince Of Persia* games – doing so would only serve to provide a mechanism for justifying the dumbing down of this reboot. But if the *Sands Of Time* marks a significant juxtaposition in your gaming career, this great-looking yet shallow experience will taint that memory. If you can forget about *Sands Of Time* before plunging into the new *Prince Of Persia* game, there's no denying it will be much easier to enjoy, but as fans of the previous games already know, that's quite impossible to do.

At the same time, there's absolutely nothing amiss in *Prince Of Persia* for those who like a good and simple action platformer – devoid of reload times and cursory enough to play, enjoy and quickly forget. There's a hell of a lot to be said for casual gaming, and Ubisoft's latest offering is something of a pinnacle in this genre. It's also good for gamers who have had three fingers cut off each of their hands and only play during *Coronation Street*'s adverts.

Spanner Spencer

Combat is always one-on-one, which is fine for platform fans, but we miss the stealth kills and action of the *Sands Of Time* trilogy

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU 2.6GHz
RAM 1GB XP/2GB Vista
GRAPHICS 256 MB, Direct X9.0c

We say

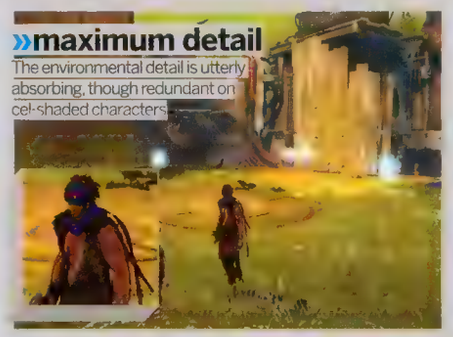
As expansive, detailed and beautiful as the environments are, the lack of other characters eases the burden on *Prince Of Persia* and makes it a good-looking and slick-moving game on minimum specs.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

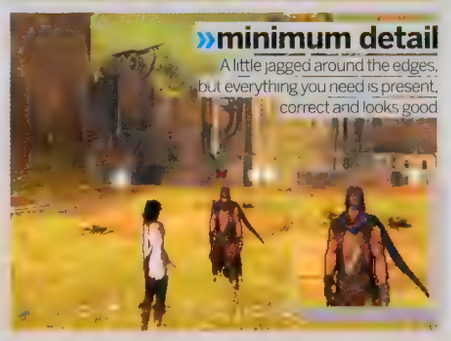
»maximum detail

The environmental detail is utterly absorbing, though redundant on cel-shaded characters



»minimum detail

A little jagged around the edges, but everything you need is present, correct and looks good

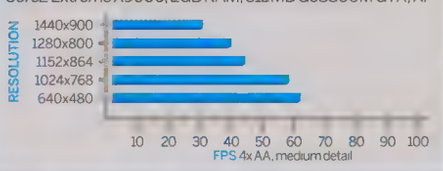


»Technical tip

Dropping the resolution only removes a few scratches and minutiae of scenery detail – nothing consequential to the gameplay, so don't tax your PC unnecessarily.

»fps vs resolution

Core2 Extreme X9000, 2GB RAM, 512MB Go8800M GTX, XP



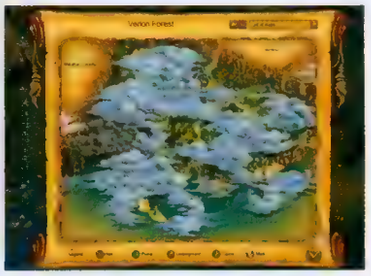
Verdict

A gorgeous, if uneventful platform game to some – *Sands Of Time* with its brains kicked out to others.

7

Heroes Of Might & Magic players will be well at home with combat

More semi-comprehensible text than you can throw a stenographer at



In three words **Classic. Detailed. Frenglish.**

KING'S BOUNTY: THE LEGEND

The resurrection of a TBS classic gets somewhat lost in translation

Details **PRICE** £34.99 | **BEST PRICE** £29.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Fantasy turn-based strategy
DEVELOPER Katauri Interactive | **PUBLISHER** Nobilis/1C | **WEB** www.kings-bounty.com

While the games industry in general is desperately trying to appeal to as broad a market as possible, on the far side of the Euro-Russian border there's a publishing company that habitually puts two fingers up to commercial Western trends and seems to cater exclusively for the taste of its massive hardcore Russian PC fan base. And sometimes the result is a surprising title that we, as PC gamers, can hold above our heads in a proud display of our gaming heritage. Our case in point is *King's Bounty: The Legend*, based on the original 1990 title *King's Bounty* and that other New World Computing classic, the *Heroes Of Might & Magic* series. Having snapped up the franchise, 1C slapped the *King's Bounty* name on a title being developed by Vladivostok-based developer Katauri, and a year later we're looking at the resurrection of a dinosaur.

The story of *King's Bounty: The Legend*'s conception isn't romantic, but the game is steeped in PC gaming traditions; the high fantasy and RPG elements that were replete in games of the pre-*Doom* era. If you thrived on *Heroes Of Might & Magic I, II* and *III* despite its flaws, you should revel in *King's Bounty*'s turn-based pleasures: you explore a real-time world map littered with treasures, locations and randomly generated monsters. Combat is turn-based and resolved on a hexagonal grid, and with each battle you win your hero gains experience and levels up, increasing in magical power and battle prowess.

Due to its strong RPG thrust, *King's Bounty* uses a single hero rather than the multitude you could hire in the *HOMM* series, and though your primary stats of Attack, Defense and Intelligence have very simple implications, your hero has a skill tree decided by the way you distribute the magical runes you acquire, enabling you to generalise or focus in the areas of might, magic or mind. If you want to cast fireballs yourself, for example, then you'll have to invest a few runes in a chaos magic so that you can learn spells from scrolls. Alternatively, if you want to focus on increasing abilities and battle stats, then you can rely on the odd scroll for spell-casting.

King's Bounty's looks fantastic, and though the graphic engine isn't cutting-edge, the use of colour and detail is vividly realised. There's no empire building involved in it (though you can build a family!), so the game sticks to the former part of the explore, expand and conquer strategy of *Heroes Of Might & Magic*, which should prove a delight for the majority of *HOMM* fans. However, the text translation isn't good, and though you can get by wading through lengthy sections of Frenglish, you'll soon find you don't really care about the plight of those terrorised villagers any further than the reward and experience you glean from the associated quest. *King's Bounty* is also bereft of a map editor, though this oversight may be addressed in the near future with the coming expansion from Katauri. Don't let either of these negatives scare you off though, *King's Bounty* is a highly accessible and very immersive title that any strategy fan will immediately warm to.

Ben Biggs

Verdict

Tighter translation and a map editor is needed, but it's still a great TBS.

7

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU P4 3GHz or AMD equivalent
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 256MB GeForce 7800 or ATI equivalent

We say

Ample video memory and RAM is recommended. Though *King's Bounty* will run on a machine at this specification, avoid choppy frame rates by upgrading here.

»Technical tip

Gamers with bigger monitors at higher resolutions can afford to turn off anti-aliasing altogether for a big performance increase with an indistinguishable effect on the visuals.

Talk to everything: animals and even inanimate objects have an opinion

Here's Mona's inventory. Note the 'idea icons' show up in translucent blue

The eerie purple and green has got *Monkey Island* voodoo all over it

In three words **Clever. Captivating. Fangtastic.**

A VAMPYRE STORY

Fancy a point-and-click adventure to really get your teeth into?

Details **PRICE** £19.99 | **BEST PRICE** £14.99 (Play.com) | **GENRE** Point-and-click adventure
DEVELOPER Autumn Moon | **PUBLISHER** Focus Home Interactive | **WEB** www.vampyrestory-game.com

Even if your name is George Lucas, you've got a pretty tough act to follow in creating a modern comic point-and-click adventure. 2008 has seen at least two titles (*So Blonde* and *Jack Keane*) try to ape the wit and depth of the *Monkey Island* games, but miss the mark by some margin. And seeing as LucasArts has all but given up on any notion of reviving the golden age of Nineties adventure gaming, it wasn't until Bill Tiller arrived back on the scene that we began to rekindle some hope. As the lead background artist working on *The Curse Of Monkey Island*, there's more than just a lick of the same art style in Autumn Moon's *A Vampyre Story*. Look closely and you'll see an inspired Tim Burton-esque gothic slant, but it's obviously still from the same mould that created those distinctive LucasArts visuals.

There's even more vampiric charm found in *A Vampyre Story*'s quirky characterisation: Mona De Lafitte is a Parisian opera singer captured by the vampire Shrowdy von Kieffer, turned undead and incarcerated in his castle in Draxsylvania. She's somewhat in denial of her true nature, sleeping in a coffin because it 'gets too bright' in her bedroom, enjoying the thick and salty-tasting 'claret' that Shrowdy brings her and refusing to look in a mirror because she's worried what she'll look like. Or, rather, what she won't see. Accompanying Mona is Froderick, her bat familiar and companion on her quest to escape from prison and return to her beloved Paris. His New York twang and wit is distinctive *Sam & Max*, deliberately chosen for that very reason, no doubt, to evoke rose-tinted memories.

Mona appears sweet and girly at first, but as your adventure advances, her slightly twisted nature breaks the surface, tittering at Froderick's puerile jokes and making light of the grim, dark and esoteric. Autumn Moon has buttoned the dynamic between these protagonists; the dialogue in general is superbly written and in a generation of games where voice-acting usually falls off the tighter end of the budget sheet, *A Vampyre Story* maintains a very high standard. Significantly, it's also funny... maybe not side-splitting Ben Elton and Richard Curtis funny, but more than enough to elicit bouts of chuckling.

This has been underpinned with a strong and inspired adventure game, every bit as well designed as the point-and-click adventures of old. Puzzles are clever and often quite devious: clues lie in the dialogue and solutions in combining items and other classic point-and-click devices. Then there's a new spin on the inventory system with idea icons, a way of physically manifesting objects and ideas in Mona's inventory that might be dull or inappropriate to realise otherwise. Finally, both Mona and Froderick can fly, sometimes giving you access to areas above and below the screen and forcing you to think laterally. There's even a small sample of a meta-game in there – something we think every adventure game should have from now on.

It's a charming, retro yet very modern update of the point-and-click genre and a game every *Monkey Island* fan should acquaint themselves with.

Ben Biggs

Verdict

Like Mona's fangs, it's sharp, pretty and it doesn't suck.

8

Tech specs

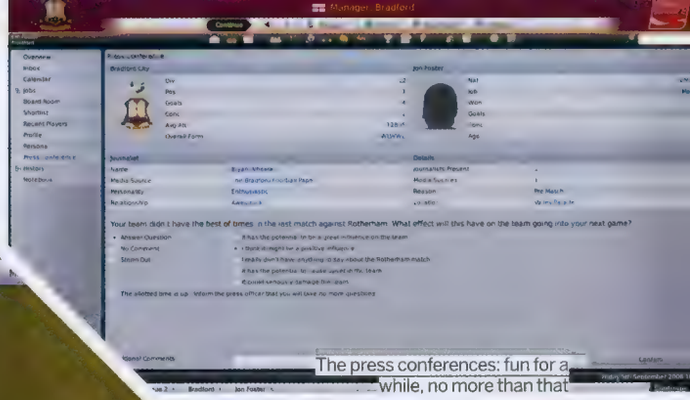
»requirements
CPU 2GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS GeForce 6 series or Radeon 9800

We say

We feel *A Vampyre Story* could have been squeezed into something smaller, especially at the fixed 1024 x 768 resolution, but at these recommended specs, your PC won't break a sweat.

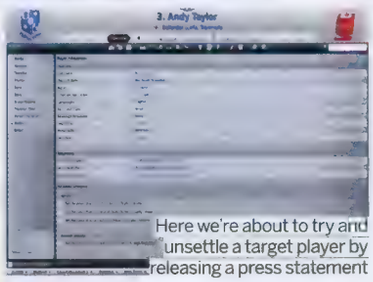
»Technical tip

? Your graphical options are very limited, but in the unlikely event you're finding things a bit choppy, switch to the low setting on the lighting and visuals.

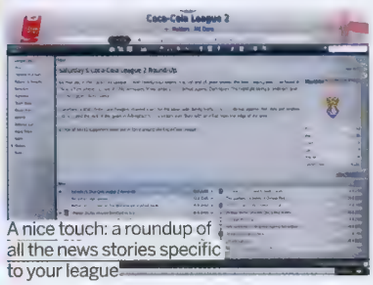


The press conferences: fun for a while, no more than that

In three words **A. New. Dimension.**



Here we're about to try and unsettle a target player by releasing a press statement



A nice touch: a roundup of all the news stories specific to your league

FOOTBALL MANAGER 2009

A new 3D match engine headlines the annual Football Manager update, but is it enough?

Details **PRICE** £39.99 | **BEST PRICE** £24.99 (Shopto.com) | **GENRE** Sports strategy
DEVELOPER Sports Interactive | **PUBLISHER** Sega | **WEB** www.footballmanager.com

Mark the calendar and remember the year. It's taken many years for the modern-day *Football Manager* franchise to match what the original ZX Spectrum game achieved back in 1982, but the 2009 edition finally adds 3D match highlights that are actually worth watching. In previous years, Sports Interactive had served up a surprisingly useful and enjoyable 2D collection of dots dashing around a pitch, but this year it has gone the whole hog, and its game is improved for it. It's the visual match action replete with real players (or dots if you prefer) that gives you some pointers as to where you can improve your team, and it's suitably tense just to sit, watch and absorb.

But then the sheer number of ways you can view the matches themselves gives a suitable indication to the sheer depth of the game. You can, for instance, switch the visual action off altogether and instead choose from a plethora of text screens. Our favourite would be the updating assistant manager notes on a progressing match (and not for nothing is a good assistant manager one of the most vital appointments you can make in the game), which give you lots of information and give it to you straight.

Should you go the visual route, then you can control the angle of the action, zoom backwards and forwards and check out replays. Or you can take Sports Interactive up on the offer to customise the view with the information you want. You'll believe SI has pretty much thought of everything, although you do get hit with a slightly longer loading time for the games themselves as a result.

Away from the game screen the improvements continue. Pre-match press conferences are new, and at least for the first hour can be quite interesting to sit through. Naturally, as with most facets of the game, your answers can cause ripples throughout your squad, so you need to tread carefully. It's also a great time to get yourself into hot water with rumoured transfers, but used effectively, it can be a good tactic. These rumours are a great addition to the game and only deepen the realism. The computerised Q&A does, however, sadly become tiresome quickly, and you'll soon be sending your assistant instead.

Outside of the generous number of fresh features, the core game has rarely looked or felt slicker. Also, we can't pinpoint whether it's PC specifications growing or *Football Manager*'s resource demands becoming friendlier, but it zipped around on our test systems, allowing us to run several leagues without really noticing any resultant hanging.

However, the game does have problems. It can be puzzling to work your way around the menus, but they don't take too long to work out. More worryingly, we had problems with stability, frequently generating error messages in the middle of negotiations. Sports Interactive does tend to be on the ball (sorry...) with its patches, though.

What *Football Manager 2009* proves is that the planet still has no game of its ilk that comes close to the level of detail on offer here. Even if it doesn't feel too different – 3D match engine aside – from last year's game, it's still the only choice.

Jon Foster

Verdict

Three points for Sports Interactive, with its rivals still nowhere in sight.

8

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2GHz
RAM 512MB XP/ 1GB Vista
GRAPHICS 128MB DirectX 9 card

We say

It's quite a scalable game thanks to the options over how many leagues you run and of what size. In the end we settled on a T8300 laptop for our test, but made sure – based on experience – that we had plenty of RAM in the machine for *Football Manager 2009* to do its work. We recommend at least 2GB.

»Technical tip

It's worth resisting the temptation to run *Football Manager 2009* in a window and work around it. It copes quite well, but you inevitably get optimum performance if you allow it sole custody of your PC.

In three words **Tunes. Beats. Blocks.**

AUDIOSURF

Offering up a new way of interacting with your musical guilty pleasures

Details **PRICE** £9.99 | **BEST PRICE** £7.98 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** Puzzle/rhythm
DEVELOPER Dylan Fitterer | **PUBLISHER** Ascaron/Steam | **WEB** audio-surf.com

Unless you're the one creating a piece of music, it's often tricky to react to it in a 'cool' way. If you're not a DJ or vocal artist, you're left with shuffling around awkwardly on a dance floor, or draping an arm over your car's window while pumping out some serious 'choonage'. This isn't the only music-related problem, though – while you may have a library numbering into the zillions, once you've heard the same track enough, it'll have lost its magic.

Solving both of these issues in one fell swoop, comes *Audiosurf*. Load it up, plug it into your music folders and it'll analyse the files it finds – detecting beats and changes in tempo before spitting out what essentially amounts to a terrifying, colourful and, most importantly, playable visualisation. In a floating and futuristic craft, not entirely dissimilar to the *WipEout* series' racers, you navigate a dynamically generated course – your speed decided by the music – with coloured blocks (related to the beat) littering the three separate lanes making it up. Your goal is to collect these blocks, amassing them in a grid before converting them into points through getting into groups of three or more.

It's certainly a simple premise, but the beauty's to be found in the execution. Decide to play through a piece of dance music with slow build-ups to energetic sections, and you'll find the course in which you're manoeuvring your craft around will reflect it perfectly. Slow, anticipatory sections will see you climb uphill comparatively slowly and free of blocks. Reach the top of it and all hell will break loose – blocks come flying hard and fast as you fly downhill at some speed. As you battle to collect the right blocks into your grid, darting from lane to lane like a driver from '*World's Most Insane Police Chases III*', the course's backdrop shifts to the music in happy harmony.

A multitude of different difficulty levels, the ability to check your score against others who've played the same track and the fun of experimenting with different musical genres makes *Audiosurf* a compelling experience.

Oliver Mather

Verdict

Audiosurf combines great visuals with a simple and addictive concept.

9

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 1.6GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 32MB GeForce 2 or equivalent

CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO

Tech specs

»requirements
CPU 2.4GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS GeForce 6600/Radeon X16000

Can't good and evil just be friends?

Details **PRICE** £9.99
BEST PRICE £5.29 (Amazon.co.uk) | **GENRE** FPS | **DEVELOPER** Mercury Steam | **PUBLISHER** Mastertronic
WEB www.codemasters.com/jericho

It's a sad thing that whenever someone's confined to the underworld or an 'Abyss', they never take very kindly to it. Much of the horror genre, along with the fun part of Halloween, stems from the fact that supernatural and undead people are not all that friendly. *Jericho* is no exception in that it sees a crack squad sent to ensure that a researcher doesn't open up an opportunity for a being created by God (but ditched for being generally a bit on the unpleasant side) to start harassing humanity at large.

With such potential for scariness, you're able to switch between squad members on each mission, ostensibly to benefit from their differing abilities and weapons loadouts or, so we like to think, just to run away with a little more health having crippled your other character. Of course, it's far from the first title to allow character switching, but with *Jericho* offering a decent variety of characters – sporting specialties ranging from mystical spells to big guns – it's a largely enjoyable feature. As fighting evil is never an easy affair, action takes place across several thousand years, from ancient Sumeria to the present day, neatly bringing plenty of location variety to proceedings.

Only a year after its original release, *Clive Barker's Jericho* is certainly still an impressive looker, and while the AI's a bit lacklustre in places (meaning you'll have to heal your team-mates a fair amount), there's a good amount of fresh gameplay to be found here.

Verdict

Not really original in any way, but good-looking, varied and solidly entertaining.

7

In three words | **Swirling. Purple. Death.**

EVERYDAY SHOOTER

It'll take your brain to another blasting dimension

Details **PRICE** $9.99 (Approx £6.50) | **GENRE** Psychedelic shoot-'em-up
DEVELOPER Queasy Games | **WEB** www.everydayshooter.com

There are no ships to upgrade in *Everyday Shooter.* No power-ups, none of that gumph. It's solely about moving and shooting, although a few unusual twists lift the game above the mediocre.

For starters, the graphics are a melting swirl of multicoloured blocks and pulsing shapes. In short, it's a trip to mushroom city, although sometimes the shifting backgrounds can be off-putting when you're trying to thread your ship – which is essentially a blob – through a wave of enemy blobs. The fact that most things are blob-ish means it's sometimes easy to lose sight of your craft.

It isn't just the colours that are trippy, but the sound, too. Each level lasts as long as its theme tune, and every shot and explosion is punctuated by odd little inflections on the music. As the action speeds up, so does the tune, which adds to the whole mesmeric trance-like effect.

The real art in *Everyday Shooter*, however, is mastering the controls. Four keys are used to move, and four keys to direct your fire. That might sound simple, and it is to begin with, but in later levels when hordes of attackers manifest, dodging nimbly and shooting with precision simultaneously is a bit like patting your head and rubbing your tummy. Only much more violent.

If you want to survive, you've got to suss out the level's enemies and deduce which ones trigger off chain explosions. During the first battle one particular opponent sets off small radial chain explosions, whereas on the second level pulsing entities link themselves together with lines, and shooting the largest one will detonate the entire screen.

Despite, or perhaps because of its simplicity, *Everyday Shooter* comes across as very fresh, and it's keenly priced. The only slight stumbling block is that the game is pretty hard, and when you die due to your ship getting lost in the background noise, let's just say a new keyboard could be on the cards. Those who relish an arcade challenge, however, will be in their kaleidoscopic element.

Verdict

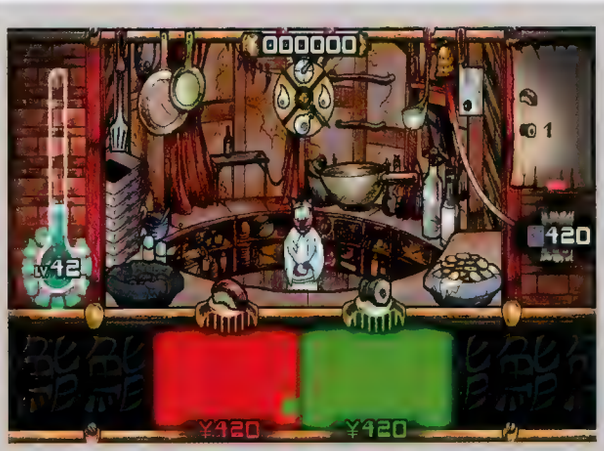
A tough but very enjoyable hallucinogenic shooter that's well worth the money.

8

Tech specs

»**requirements**
CPU 1.7GHz
RAM 256MB
GRAPHICS 128MB

Attack of the killer eyes



WAXY'S SUSHI PARTY

Something fishy this way comes...

Details **PRICE** Free | **GENRE** Arcade-based reactions and maths
DEVELOPER Hive | **WEB** tinyurl.com/sushiparty

In this arcade game with a *Diner Dash* vibe, Waxy the weasel has to run his sushi kitchen using a mix of fast reactions and sharp maths skills. Coloured blobs representing sushi move along the bottom of the screen, and when they pass into the plate of the matching colour, you've got to stab the correct button to chop and serve. Sounds easy enough, but they move at different speeds, sometimes in small clusters, and you can't see the blobs when they're over the matching plate because they disappear (being the same colour).

The game is further complicated by customers' bills that pop up regularly. Each sushi has a different price, and you've got to work out the sums on the bills and type the correct amount in with your right hand on the numeric keypad, while simultaneously continuing to chop sushi with your left.

Doing both tasks at the same time is a tricky blend of multiplication, memory and reactions. It is, quite frankly, a very demanding game. Luckily, *Sushi Party* is fairly liberal in allowing mistakes, and as long as you get most orders added up correctly, the game lets you muddle through missing quite a few of the sushi pieces.

Be warned – if you're rubbish at maths, you're not going to get far (especially on the hard level with four types of sushi to deal with). Each level is essentially the same, albeit with bigger numbers, but *Sushi Party* is still an enjoyable lunch-break challenge.

Verdict

An engaging mix of maths and button tapping, although it does become repetitive.

7

Tech specs

»**requirements**
CPU 800MHz
RAM 128MB
GRAPHICS 32MB

In three words | **Loot. Level. Build.**

Calling the town's inhabitants to defend against a dark elf raid

HINTERLAND

Diablo with a splash of city building thrown in

Details **PRICE** $19.99 (Approx £13) | **GENRE** Action RPG/RTS | **DEVELOPER** Tilted Mill
WEB www.tiltedmill.com/hinterland

Role-playing blended with real-time strategy is nothing new, but Tilted Mill has distilled this concept right down to the fundamentals. The result is a click-and-loot *Diablo*-style RPG integrated with some simple base building.

In *Hinterland*, you play the leader of a town trying to impress the King by clearing the outlying region of beasts. Initially, there's just your hero and his homestead, but as NPCs visit they can be hired to expand the settlement, providing you've got the money. Every mouth has to be fed, so farmers and hunters must be employed to generate food, and merchants, inn-keepers and suchlike produce cash.

Of course, the best way to acquire gold is to hire a guardsman or two, add them to your party and head out into the wilderness to kill monsters. The randomised map consists of encounter areas stocked with the usual orcs, trolls and goblins, and herein lies *Hinterland*'s first failing. This all feels very generic, and the lack of any interesting plot lines or events (aside from the occasional raid on your town or resource demand from the King) reinforces this.

The strategic side of the game offers a lot of options on the face of it, but it's let down by the fact that combat is unsatisfying and superficial. All manner of decisions are made in town, with a diverse range of possible building upgrades that secure the production of magical armour and beneficial potions. But when you're out in the field hacking the limbs off a gnoll, all that needs to be done is click on the enemy.

Other allied party members control themselves, and there are no spellbooks or special abilities to handle. It's a matter of click-click-click and gulping the odd health potion. Tactics are kept to a bare minimum, and both the enemy (and ally) AI and pathfinding leave a lot to be desired.

On the harder difficulty settings, balancing town design and defence against loot excursions is initially interesting, but the repetitive environments and combat slowly wore down our resolve to play.

Tech specs
»requirements
CPU 1.8GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 64MB

Verdict 6
Hinterland boasts some neat ideas, but the execution doesn't quite come off.

CAVEMAN CRAIG SPECIAL EDITION

Lead Craig and his people to victory against the dinosaurs

Details **PRICE** $4.99 (Approx £3)
GENRE Strategy
DEVELOPER Rhys & Tim Andrews
WEB tinyurl.com/cavemancraig

In *Caveman Craig*, the challenge is to build up a prehistoric tribe and balance its population between three types of cavemen: hunters, gatherers and preparers. Hunters defend the tribe from predatory dinosaurs by pelting them with rocks, while gatherers collect berries and drag dead dinosaur carcasses back to the cave. It's here that the preparers cook the food, filling a meter that allows you to spawn new cavemen.

Craig, whom you control, can perform every ability, but most importantly he has to teach new cavemen their basic skills. By getting a hunter to follow him while he throws rocks at a Velociraptor, the chap will eventually learn this ability and be able to perform it of his own accord.

It's a clever little gameplay scheme, but there are some distinct irritations here. Sometimes the game throws distinctly unfair situations at you, such as several dino stampedes in a row that can pretty much wipe out all your hunters. We also came across some reasonably nasty bugs, which varied from Craig getting stuck in a pool of acid (that one dinosaur spits at you) to one of our gatherers getting stuck on the edge of the screen (at a crucial moment when he was the only one we had left).

Once you've played for about an hour, it all gets rather staid as there's little in the way of new features introduced, just more training and rock hurling. On the plus side, there are a couple of decent extra mini-games, and it costs next to nothing (and there's a free version to try, too).

Darren Allen

Tech specs
»requirements
CPU 1GHz
RAM 512MB
GRAPHICS 64MB

Verdict 5
It's fun for a short while, but there's no lasting appeal, and the game's a little buggy.

MOD REPORT

THE BEST MODS & TOTAL CONVERSIONS FOR THE GREATEST GAMES

BLUE MOON RISING

Mod details
GAME UT2004 | SIZE 177.03MB | VERSION 2.0
WEB moddb.com/mods/blue-moon-rising

There's no shortage of survival horror games out there, particularly when you start looking into mods. But *Blue Moon Rising* is something of a pleasant break from the usual solitary, creeping, psychological style this sub-genre tends to gravitate toward.

Blue Moon Rising still adheres to the strong plot-driven requirement of survival horror, but bends the shape of the mod around some excellent FPS action. The world is overrun by brutal, fast zombies under the control of a mysterious intelligence. This mature-themed mod allows a band of well-armed survivors to join the fight for humanity just as the tide is about to turn against the living dead for the first time in 50 years.

Without wanting to sound ungrateful, this mod's been limping along for a while now without much change. But the recent release of V2.0 was well worth the wait, particularly if you like tense, action-packed mulitplayers with some well thought-out purpose behind the bullets. We'll be keeping a very close eye on the progress of *Blue Moon Rising*, so make sure you give it a blast.

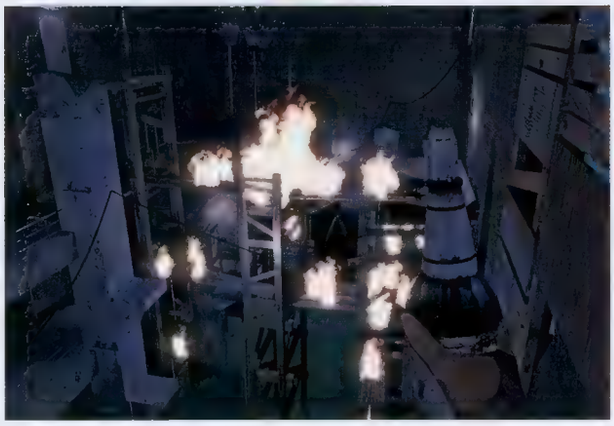
MENTALITY

Mod details
GAME Half-Life 2 | SIZE 156.56MB | VERSION 0.1 WEB moddb.com/mods/mentality

This survival horror mod was featured at the AVCon convention a short while back, and the alpha release has now been made available through the team's ModDB page.

Alongside the expected virus outbreaks and zombie attacks that all good survival horrors seem to feature these days, *Mentality* throws a dose of mental instability into the mix. The main character's fragile mind warps the environment and ensures you struggle to understand what's real and what's a figment of your tortured imagination.

Currently the enemies are a little unvaried, but for an alpha build, *Mentality* is looking decidedly slick as both an atmospheric psychological horror and a dynamic FPS.



Work in progress

CITY 17: EP 1

Mod details
GAME Half-Life 2
WEB geardev.wordpress.com

This is a *Half-Life 2* mod that aimed to release almost two years ago, but the dev team behind it had such grand ideas for what they wanted to accomplish that it's only recently coming to fruition. *City 17* has grown to become the beginning of a substantial franchise, and the extra years of work are really showing.

The simple premise of a rebel attempting to escape the war-torn City 17, should allow for a dynamic and action-packed FPS, and judging by the screenshots it's almost ready for an impressive first release. We'll be keeping a close eye on *City 17: Episode 1*, and we suggest you do the same.

UNREAL SAFARI

Mod details
GAME Unreal Tournament 3
WEB moddb.com/mods/unreal-safari

We'd love to see more light-hearted mods like *Unreal Safari* – an animal-based FPS set in the savannah – but modders seem to have such a dark outlook on gaming. Here, you'll get to play as hippos, tigers, gazelles and monkeys, with typical game modes such as deathmatch and team games. There's also a 'hunt' mode planned, which will pit one lucky player against all the others.

This promises to add a superb survival lilt to the nature-based gameplay, and should make for a diverse challenge for the gun and concrete-weary gamer.

NEW RELEASES! PLAYABLE CODE

BACK TO THE FUTURE: HILL VALLEY

This total conversion for *GTA: Vice City* has been under development for quite some time, but the recent 0.2e release adds a bevy of time travelling intrigue to the mix.

The majority of functions are now implemented and bring the classic film trilogy to life. Full time travel is possible, and it comes with all the difficulties Marty McFly had to put up with, such as the DeLorean randomly breaking down, having to use the lightning hook to feed power to the time circuits and alternate 1985 timelines after you muck things up in the past.

The sandbox gameplay also lets you take to the variety of vehicles seen in the films, such as the (non-time travelling) flying cars and Doc Brown's steam-powered hover train. A host of smaller nuances also help bring Hill Valley to life, such as era-appropriate radio stations, re-enactments of scenes from the trilogy and even a remote controlled DeLorean. This is heavy! **www.bttfhillvalley.co.uk**

DAWN OF WAR PROFESSIONAL: DARK CRUSADE EDITION

One of the biggest problems with the (otherwise excellent) *Dawn Of War* game was its unbalanced gameplay. As players advanced through the game, units would become obsolete, while others became powerful enough to do all the grunt work for you.

Dawn Of War: Professional aims to address these, and many other issues, and provide the immersive experience the original game ultimately failed to realise. Still based in the Warhammer 40,000 universe, the latest update of this prolific RTS expansion is an almost entire redesign of the original concept, but remains faithful to the franchise.

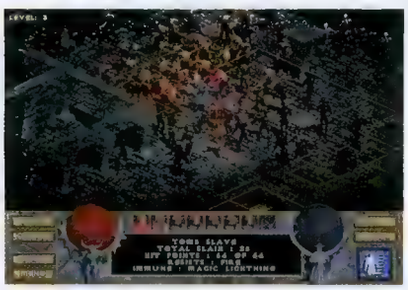
The developer summarises the achievements of *Dark Crusade Edition* quite eloquently, "Every single unit, ability, research and structure of every race has been individually groomed to give you guys the most polished *DOWPro* experience possible." If *Dawn Of War* is on your games shelf, get ready to dust it off. **www.dowpro.org**

DIABLO: THE HELL

Mod details
GAME Diablo Hellfire
WEB www.thehell.narod.ru

Here's a game you don't see many mods for. Perhaps that's because *Diablo: Hellfire* did a pretty splendid job of achieving all its own goals, but *The Hell* doesn't aim to change the source so much as refine it.

This mod irons out a lot of the game's original kinks, and ups the challenge level to one more suited to the hardcore gamers the title was aimed at in the first place. Indeed, it ramps up the chaos to near-impossible levels, so if you're looking for a mod to really test your trigger finger, take a look at *The Hell*.



JAILBREAK

Mod details
GAME Half-Life 2 | SIZE 291.84MB
WEB www.jailbreaksource.com

We've looked at the manic thrill-fest that is the *Half-Life 2* mod, *Jailbreak*, before. The fascinating gameplay mechanics require you to battle your way to a release switch to free team-mates from jail while trying to put your opponents behind bars.

During a podcast interview with the moddb.com boys, the dev team behind *Jailbreak* joked about releasing a version of their mod featuring dinosaurs battling it out against robots. They must have thought it pretty funny, as they've gone ahead and got to work on it. Dinosaurs vs robots will form the basis of the 0.5 version of the mod, and while it'll be essentially the same game, there's also a host of new maps and guns to accompany the new characters, along with the wry entertainment value of giant lizards taking on out-of-control war toasters.

OMFGZOMBIESLOL

Mod details
GAME Half-Life 2 | SIZE 13.11MB | VERSION Full
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/omfgzombieslol

What's surprising about zombies is that despite the horrific nature of their existence – dead people turning cannibalistic and attacking the living – they can become genuinely amusing creatures in the right application.

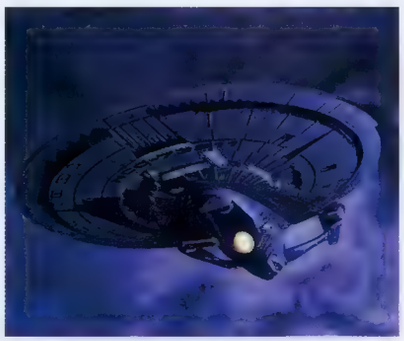
The wonderfully titled *Half-Life 2* co-op multiplayer mod, *Omfgzombieslol*, is one such application. Teams of players band together to fend off attacks of genetically enhanced zombies, including incendiary undead, exploding headcrabs and suicide bomber zombies. A second team then runs the zombie faction, requiring each group to build their own defences while attempting to break through the other's blockade.

OVERCOAT'S FALLOUT 3 MUSIC REPLACEMENT PACK

Mod details
GAME Fallout 3
WEB tinyurl.com/fallout3mrp

It never fails to amaze us how fast modders work, and only a few days after *Fallout 3* hit the shelves, OverCoat had an add-on available to replace the somewhat orchestral score of the original game.

We quite liked the in-game music, but this is a pretty intense track list – adopting more of a drum and bass sound with spatterings of dark ambient and techno throw in, which it has to be said is equally fitting during play. You can never have too much choice, one way or another.



AFTERMATH ADD-ON PACK

Mod details
GAME Star Trek: Legacy
VERSION RC3 Full Version | SIZE 5MB
WEB theaftermathmod.star-trek-games.com

We've previously looked at the prolific *Star Trek: Legacy* mod, *Aftermath*, so we're delighted to see progress is continuing beyond version 2.0.

The team has just released its first *Add-on Pack* for the mod, which features design and texture overhauls for three ships – the Sovereign (a galaxy-class vessel in the style of the Enterprise), the K'tinga (a Klingon bird of prey) and the Akira (a small, manoeuvrable Federation battle ship). Also bundled with the revamped spacecraft are two new maps. The Yispen map is an eight-player mission created in-house by the mod team, while the six-player Siaraname System was created by members of the *Aftermath* community.

According to the team, this will be your only chance to get hold of the updated Sovereign ship, so fans of the game shouldn't waste time heading over to the official mod page.

THE ESSENTIAL... ROME: TOTAL WAR

VENI, VIDI, VICI

» **RELEASED** Sep 2004
» **DEVELOPER** Creative Assembly
» **PUBLISHER** Activision
» **GENRE**: Real-time tactics/turn-based strategy
» **LATEST PATCH** 1.5/1.6
» **WEB** www.totalwar.com

The funny thing about period wars is that we all have our favourites. *Rome: Total War* might be exactly the style of game you want to play, only you're more interested in the American Civil War, Mongolian Empire or Napoleonic wars. Thanks to the vibrant modding community providing a backbone for the real-time strategy genre, buying this one game can provide you with every war you ever wanted to re-enact.

Naturally, the mod developer's imagination goes far beyond history books. One of the greatest sources of inspiration for expansions of *Rome: Total War* (and the other excellent source games in the franchise) are the armies and battles of Tolkien's Middle-earth. Releasing a full-price *Lord Of The Rings* game these days must be something of a nightmare for commercial game companies, as the depth of quality and understanding behind many of these modifications is profound.

But historical accuracy undeniably reigns supreme in this arena, and although it's a sure sign of middle-age creeping up on us, our inquisitive nature when it comes to war history is never better sated than when playing out the roles of all factions.

R:TW MOD SWITCHER

www.twcenter.net/forums/downloads.php?do=file&id=171

We like to kick off a Mod Report with a utility to help manage and run your mods more efficiently, and that's the primary purpose of Vercingetorix's *R:TW* Mod Switcher. Allowing for multiple mod installs at once and simple switching between them, this is a great companion for an expanded source game of *R:TW*.

TRIVIUM INDEPENDENT MAP EDITOR

www.twcenter.net/forums/downloads.php?do=file&id=511

A useful tool for creating campaigns from scratch, allowing editing of ground, height, settlement, climates, terrain and a host of other features for kicking off a user-made map. A great way to start your *R:TW* modding career.

THE FOURTH AGE: TOTAL WAR

Mod details
WEB www.thefourthage.org/home
SIZE 30.34MB | VERSION 2.5

Tolkien once started work on a sequel to *Lord Of The Rings*, entitled *The New Shadow*. Set around a century after the events of *The Return Of The King* in the fourth age of Middle-earth, he soon abandoned the work after he found it depressing writing about an age of men. But the mod team behind *The Fourth Age* decided to explore what Middle-earth could have looked like once the land that was once Mordor had been reclaimed by men, and the united realms of Tolkien's world began to crumble as the men who governed them began vying for expansion and power, and rumours of a dark cult grew in the streets of Gondor.

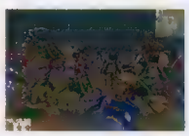
With the new *War Of Men* expansion for *The Fourth Age*, this is a superb alternative to the many Tolkienian mods out there that admirably bridge the fantasy and historical realms of strategy games.

NAPOLEONIC TOTAL WAR II

Mod details
WEB tinyurl.com/napoleonictotalwarii
SIZE 126.97MB | VERSION 2.0.1

***Rome: Total War* is something of a pinnacle in the RTS genre right now, but sometimes you'd rather fight a more contemporary battle.** Well, if you've got version 1.5 of the source game in your library, heading into musket-laden France for a bit of Napoleonic warfare is a great alternative to swords and sandals.

The *Napoleonic Total War II* total conversion not only brings old Boney's armies back to life, but features some excellent alternative factions such as the United Netherlands forces (consisting of Dutch, Belgian and German Nassau natives), the ferocious Prussian infantry and smaller, independent armies of Brunswick.



Of course, you've also got extensive French and British forces to take into battle across the 46 historical maps – many of which were built by the thriving community supporting this mod.

LORD OF THE RINGS: TOTAL WAR

Mod details
WEB www.moddb.com/mods/the-lord-of-the-rings-total-war | SIZE 246.51MB | VERSION 2.0b

There are plenty of *Lord Of The Rings* games available, but it seems crazy paying for many of them considering the wealth of Tolkienian mods that are out there – not least of which being this *Rome Total War: Alexander* conversion.

Commanding the armies of Middle-earth (based on the Peter Jackson interpretations, which is no bad thing), several factions spread among four different races of men, elves, orcs and dwarves, and each have a great variety of units and beasts such as the mighty Mumakil, trolls and Nazgul.

Battles ranging from the original Alliance of Elves and Men to aiding Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring make for an encompassing journey through Middle-earth. It seems as though development may have stopped around the 2.0 beta, but you can still check out the team's excellent work on their **moddb.com** page.

GRECO-PERSIAN WARS

Recently released into beta testing, the *Greco-Persian Wars* mod depicts one of the oldest documented periods of warring history. Following the rising dominance of the Persian Empire as it crossed into Greek city states (a story made all the more famous recently with Frank Miller's *300*), armies of Greeks, Parthians, Macedonians, Egyptians, Seleucids and Persians featuring units such as Persian Immortals, Macedonian pikemen, Egyptian pikemen, Seleucid pikemen, Persian sparabara, Persian missiles and cavalry can take part in the infamous Battle of Thermopylae. Armour and underpants at the ready, Spartans!

Mod details
Web www.moddb.com/mods/greco-persian-wars-modification | SIZE 50.13MB

ARTHURIAN: TOTAL WAR

This *Rome Total War: Barbarian Invasion* mod sets the battle during the time of the legendary King Arthur on British soil, in Ireland and into Northern Gaul – featuring factions from the various ancient Dark Ages tribes including Gwent, Powys, Llydaw, Gwynedd, Rheged, Saxons and Picts.

This is another mod that receives regular team updates, but the community has been working on some pretty outstanding add-ons as well – most notably the *Raven Feeders* extension, which adds an additional 20 units and four new cultures to the mix. Coupled with the likes of the *Beowulf* and *Gods & Fighting Men* extensions, *Arthurian: Total War* is as much a new addition to the franchise as *Barbarian Invasion* itself.

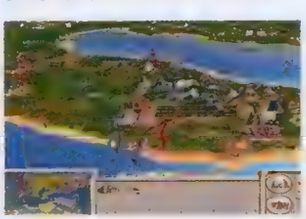
Mod details
WEB tinyurl.com/arthuriantotalwar
SIZE 182.43MB | VERSION Full

ROME: TOTAL REALISM

Although the *Rome: Total War* source game goes a long way toward providing historical accuracy (where required), this prolific mod aims to bring as much realism to the game as possible. The team even boasts a PhD-level historical researcher to help make this the most faithful and immersive representation of the time period as possible. The mod boasts over 200 historically accurate units, a revamped combat statistics system and a brand new 'Area of Recruitment' gameplay mechanic among its many features and improvements of the source game.

The mod team are also working on a follow up called *Under The Eagle*, which will run from the forthcoming *Rome: Total Realism* 7.0 map with all the historically accurate borders, city locations and geography this mod is known for.

Mod details
WEB www.rometotalrealism.org
SIZE 161.74MB | VERSION 6.0



ZHANGUO TOTAL WAR

China's certainly had its share of civil conflicts and impressive armies, so it seems only fitting that the inspiration for the Terracotta Warriors gets its own *Total War* adaptation.

***Zhanguo Total War* is a total conversion mod set around 480BC in feudal China. As the Zhao Dynasty crumbles, you take control of one of China's many warring states in a battle to unite the massive nation under one banner.**

Featuring authentic buildings, environments and weaponry from the Zhao period, *Zhanguo Total War* recreates the massive armies of ancient China in all their glory.

Mod details
WEB tinyurl.com/zhanguototalwar
SIZE 445.75MB

NEXT MONTH
Diablo II mods come under the TPCG spotlight

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MMO WORLDS

Your guide to th[illegible]asive [illegible]e

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The MMO review event of the year!

SPAWN POINT

MMO NEWS WORLDS

NEWS, VIEWS AND CURRENT EVENTS FROM THE WORLDS OF MMO

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Welcome

This issue, Spawn Point is dutifully leaving out a slice of Sand Pear Pie and a glass of Silvermoon Port for Santa in the hope of getting some of the latest MMO treats in its stocking: new releases like *The Chronicles Of Spellborn* and 2009's forthcoming MMOs such as *Aion: Tower Of Eternity* and *DC Universe Online*. After all, we've been good this year, which is why many MMOs are getting into the seasonal spirit and rewarding us with trinkets, consumables and other items in a wide variety of mid-winter celebrations.

OMFG!

Guild Wars 2's ambitious project to allow new characters to inherit names and rewards from the original game is the likeliest cause of the hold-up in the game's development cycle, along with the change from an instanced to a

Class **Fantasy/Sci-fi**

The top MMOs of 2009

We take a look at next year's forthcoming releases

This past year was a great year for MMO gamers. High profile releases like *Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* and *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* gave us new, big-budget versions of classic fantasy worlds to conquer while pre-established ones like *WOW* and *LOTRO* released massive expansion packs. Many more developers embraced the MMO space in 2008 and began creating a range of online games, which we'll see the fruit of in 2009.

> "It's the slightly less high-profile releases slated for 2009 that are perhaps more interesting"

Some of the most hotly anticipated titles for next year are of course the high-profile ones – NCsoft's *Aion: Tower Of Eternity* and SOE's *DC Universe Online* and *The Agency*. One big release that has fallen somewhat off the radar is *Aion*'s NCsoft stablemate *Guild Wars 2*, with its promise of new in-game races and an inheritance system from the previous game's expansion pack *Eye Of The North*. Originally planned for release in the final quarter of 2008, it didn't even go into beta this year.

It's the slightly less high-profile releases slated for 2009 that are perhaps more interesting to new MMO gamers, though. Sci-fi fans are awaiting the release of *Jumpgate Evolution* with its fast-paced, twitchy ship combat system, TV spin-off *Stargate Worlds* and the post-apocalyptic online action RPGs *Earthrise* and *Fallen Earth*. And sci-fi classic *Eve Online* has some game-changing plans for the sandbox-based space odyssey, including Station Walking, the first implementation of a fully 3D avatar system that will get pilots out of their ships and eventually, developer CCP recently commented, to the surfaces of the planets below. The ambitious plans include player-generated spaces such as quarters, corporation headquarters and even bars, where trading and other player activities can go on.

PST! WHISPERS FROM MMO WORLDS

LAST CHAOS PREDICTS US ELECTION

Players of free-to-play MMO *Last Chaos*, from Aeria Games (publishers of *Shaiya*) correctly predicted the result of the US election last month during an in-game event. Obama voters won a 200 per cent temporary experience boost.

MMO CALENDAR ON SALE

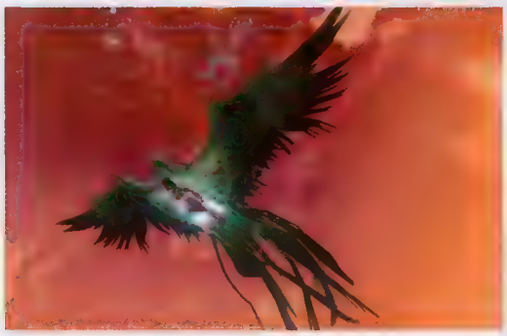
The 2009 MMO Calendar featuring artwork from *WOW*, *WAR* and many more has gone on sale at **www.mmocalendar.com**. All proceeds from the sale of the calendar go to St Jude's Research Hospital for children.

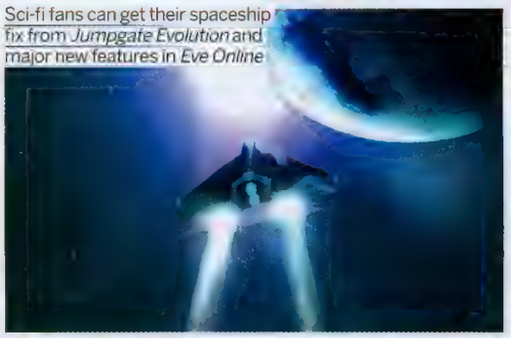
ARCHLORD

Codemasters Online recently launched a new hardcore PvP server called Cynpus along with the latest update to the free-to-play army-building MMORPG, *Archlord* which boasts around 750,000 users.

7MILLION

Upcoming crime-based MMO *7Million* has released details on the first of its three player races. The cod-Celtic Cúram have the luck of the Irish and, it seems, many of their other stereotypes too.





Sci-fi fans can get their spaceship fix from *Jumpgate Evolution* and major new features in *Eve Online*

The post-apocalyptic future is a starting point for two of 2009's MMOs, the similarly named *Earthrise* and *Fallen Earth*

Class **All**

Look out for festive gifts in your favourite MMOs and you may pick up rare items along with seasonal ones

What presents are on offer?

Christmas 2008

It's that time of year yet again. Your favourite MMO has only just got over being decked out with cheap-looking zombies and other Halloween content, and now everywhere you look snow is glistening, which is a bit disconcerting in the tropical temperatures of Kamadan and similarly southerly in-game cities.

It's the time for a cunningly named midwinter event, in which some old geezer will hand out presents amid snowball fights and other festivities. So what are you expecting in your Winter Veil/Wintersday/Midwinter stocking? Here's a look at some of the surprises the in-game equivalent of Santa has in store. *WOW* has some of the best on offer, with a range of presents wrapped in degrees of loveliness from your local pound shop to Harrods. *Guild Wars* boasts surprise presents as well as custom sweetie treats and drinks, and *LOTRO* players will have Yule trees in their front yards.

Games industry

BigWorld and Wargaming.net team up

BigWorld to develop engine for MMO

New Orleans indie games developer Wargaming.net has announced that it is developing its first MMO in conjunction with Russian middleware provider BigWorld, from whom it has licensed the BigWorld Technology Suite, which comprises server and client software, a 3D engine and live management tools. Victor Kislyi, CEO of Wargaming.net, which also has a development studio in Belarus, commented, "Having built many engines from the ground up, we were looking for a complete solution to develop our first MMO that will save us time and eliminate technical risks. BigWorld's Technology Suite, along with their world-class support, is key in allowing us to develop our title quickly."

"We're excited to be partnering with this highly professional team, using our platform to expand and innovate in the MMO market," added Mike Allenson, BigWorld's business development manager in Europe and Russia.

Class **Fantasy**

The Chronicles Of Spellborn goes gold

Released in Europe and gearing up for the US

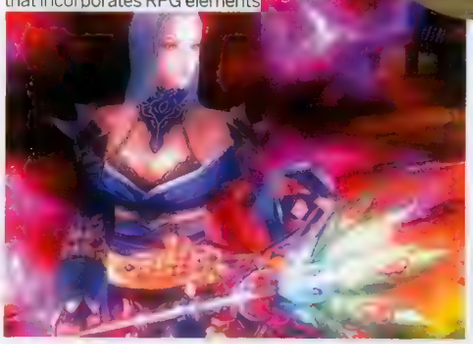
It started its development as a cartoony Frogster fantasy RPG, but it was soon apparent to the publishing company that they had something a bit special in *The Chronicles Of Spellborn*. Developed by Dutch studio Spellborn NV, *The Chronicles Of Spellborn* was released in the UK and Europe on 27 November 2008.

During its time in development, the game evolved as new ideas and practices were implemented in the MMO marketplace. Gone is the point-and-click combat system of old in favour of a far more hands-on hack-and-slash complete with combos, and skills are colour-coded to let you know which is a Combo Opener, Build-Up and Finisher. It's by no means the biggest release of 2008, but we reckon this game has the potential to become a cult classic with fantasy MMO gamers.

OMFG!

More servers had to be put online less than a month after the launch of *Atlantica Online* due to overwhelming demand. The number of concurrent users had increased by around 300 per cent over this period alone.

Atlantica Online is a turn-based MMO strategy game released in October 2008 that incorporates RPG elements



WHY YOU SHOULD PLAY...

Atlantica Online

Travel the ancient world in search of Atlantis

If you didn't like new MMO *Atlantica Online* during its release in October this year, developer Ndoors gave you $20 to trade-in your character. With that kind of deal on offer, how could anyone not give this free-to-play turn-based strategy a go?

There was a catch, of course – said character had to be created at launch and Level 50 before 30 November to qualify for the offer, and had to have provided a PayPal account at registration. Ndoors had to have a lot of faith in its game to make this offer in the first place, but the sharp-eyed among you will note that to qualify for it relied on some hardcore grinding and the encouragement to do some optional in-game item shopping. You had to really spend a lot of time figuring out whether you didn't like it, during which the developer obviously wanted to win you over to its cause and keep playing. The more cynical among you may carp that if you thought it was crap the moment you signed in there was no way you were getting your 20 bucks back, but ask yourselves, would a strategy game stoop to such, um... stratagems?

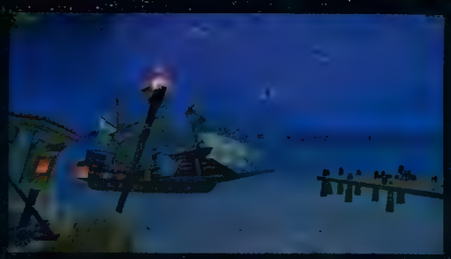
In any case, *Atlantica Online* is a bit more than a strategy game because despite its old-school turn-based model, it incorporates RPG elements in somewhat the same way that *Fantasy Wars* did. You have a major character and up to eight other NPC mercenaries offering different skill sets as well – much like the NPC henchmen of *Guild Wars*. But your party can be even bigger than this – group with two more players and you've got a party 27 strong to take into battle. Set in an alternatively timelined ancient Earth, battles are staged in real and mythical locations such as classical Rome and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon as players search for the fabled city of Atlantis, conquering cities and even nations along the way. Part strategy, part world-builder and part role-player, *Atlantica Online* is well worth a go. But we're not giving you a tenner for it.

THIS MONTH IN...

A look back at the past month's events in the big five

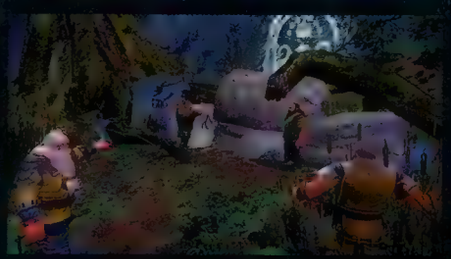
World of Warcraft

In Azeroth, the weeks-long events held at the Feast of Winter Veil and New Year's Eve are still going strong, with a variety of gifts, items, quests and the rare Reindeer special mount available to both Horde and Alliance adventurers.



The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

For the sake of amusement, players in *LOTRO* recently held a 'Hands Across Middle-earth' event on the Nimrodel server – although it only stretched from Bag End to the Brandywine Bridge. As the organisers said, "If we don't get many people we'll do a conga line around the Shire..."

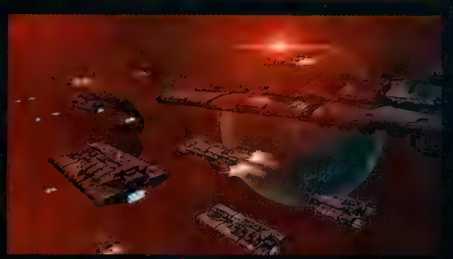


Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning

The Heavy Metal in-game event held between 17 November and 1 December reintroduced the Dark Elf Black Guard and introduced the Empire-based Knight of the Blazing Sun character classes. The event allowed players to complete a quest tree for an early access look at the two new classes.

EVE Online

The *Quantum Rise* expansion went live, introducing graphics updates for previous Trinity content, a more customisable UI, a rebalancing of ship speeds, custom medals for corporations and alliances and a new capital ship class called the Orca as well as the new in-game subscription service that allows you to convert time cards into items.



Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

Murder Points were implemented throughout Hyboria, which see characters who frequently attack lower-level characters in PvP develop a level of notoriety that changes the way NPCs will interact with them, affecting quests, rewards and much more – including vigilantes and militia hunting you down...

PST!

ZOMG!

The cutesy world of *Gaia Online* now sports an open beta of a new browser-based MMO in the shape of the utterly silly *zOMG*! Inanimate objects from the world of *Gaia* have come to life and they're not happy ...

RUNES OF MAGIC

Upcoming free-to-play 3D fantasy MMORPG *Runes Of Magic* passed its last set of server stress tests with flying colours in closed beta, ahead of an open beta that is planned to start before the end of the year

WARRIOR EPIC

Upcoming fantasy MMO *Warrior Epic* from Austin-based developers Possibility Studios and publisher True Games will allow players to bind the spirits of dead characters to their weapons, inflicting massive PvP damage

Guild Master

Each month MMO Worlds brings you advice on running the perfect guild

You know what it's like – it's Christmas; you're knackered, temporarily morbidly obese, and you've seen more festering plague zombies than you care to mention over the course of the festivities, in the shape of your extended family. All you want to do is check your inventory – and some muppet wants you to do a raid. There's a certain kind of person who runs raids at this particular time of year, and all of your standard excuses for not joining in won't work with them. They don't get the whole friends and family festivities thing, because the nearest they've come to Christmas cheer is when Mother came downstairs to their bedroom (which she still calls the utility room) on the day before Christmas Eve and forcibly ran their *Runescape* duvet cover through a boil wash. Like Scrooge, some Guild Masters just don't care that there will be no turkey for Tiny Tim if you join a raid.

There's really only one cure for these people, and that's to invoke the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present, Future and In-game Events. Tell them that you've got a quest you'd like to finish up first, and it'd be quicker if they helped you, before pelting them with snowballs and embarking on a mission for that one special seasonal item. It'll take all of about 15 minutes before they piss off and leave you alone.

The big five Events calendar

What's happening in your world?

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Darkmoon Faire

JANUARY 2009

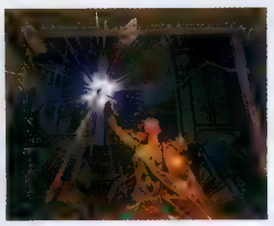
What: The first Darkmoon Faire of the New Year offers all you'd expect from the monthly event – items, trade goods and prizes, plus all the entertainment your Winter Veil-addled brain could want, including, of course, the obligatory cheap imaginary booze.
Where: The first Darkmoon Faire of 2009 will be held in Mulgore, just south of Thunder Bluff in the Barrens region.

AGE OF CONAN

Ymir's Pass goes live

TBA

What: A new outdoor area in *Age Of Conan* is to be implemented. Ymir's Pass is for Level 55 characters and above and introduces dramatic new locations, quests, NPCs and storylines for mid to high-level players.
Where: Ymir's Pass is currently live on the test live server, but game producer Craig Morrison is hoping that it will go live throughout Hyboria very soon.

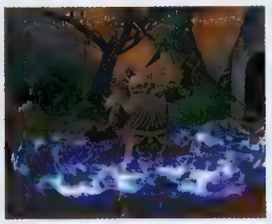


THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

Ettenmoors update

LIVE NOW

What: The update to the Ettenmoors went live with the *Mines Of Moria* expansion pack. It includes shared access for players and monster players alike to the Delving of Frór, based on a territorial system of capturing two of the five outposts in the region.
Where: The Ettenmoors are on the north-eastern border of the Misty Mountains – meaning you need to journey through there on your way to the Mines of Moria.

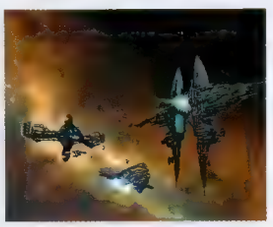


WARHAMMER ONLINE

Experience enhancements

LIVE NOW

What: The fourth phase of the RvR enhancement programme went live with two important changes. First, players will gain experience from capturing enemy battlefield objectives, and secondly, healing other players will earn you Renown.
Where: The experience enhancements will be available across all servers, even if you've taken advantage of the recent free character transfers to different servers within the game.

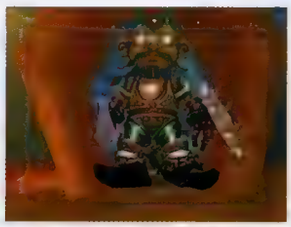


EVE ONLINE

Alchemy goes live

LIVE NOW

What: The new Alchemy process upgrades Tech 2 equipment by using some previously unknown reaction methods to create key crafting materials – a step in the direction of the next update's Tech 3 equipment.
Where: Alchemy was implemented in the *Quantum Rise* expansion, so expect the larger production guilds in 0.0 space to be making use of it as soon as they can.



Sometimes the cure is worse than the disease

In three words **Review. Proof. Wonder.**

WOW: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

After four years of grinding, are Death Knights and snow enough?

Details | **GENRE** Fantasy MMORPG | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard
PUBLISHER Blizzard | **WEB** www.worldofwarcraft.com/wrath

Talk about review-proof. *Wrath Of The Lich King*, Blizzard's frozenly anticipated second expansion to *World Of Warcraft*, the most successful game of all time, sold 2.8 million copies in its first 24 hours, almost half a million more than *Burning Crusade* did back in January 2007. So much for the notion of mass *WOW* burn-out. In terms of longevity, let alone profit margin, *WOW* has long since surpassed the records of all other MMOs combined, which might leave you expecting *WOTLK* to be the grandest, loudest, content-densest product of all.

But happily, and perhaps surprisingly, Blizzard has crafted a doll's house instead of a skyscraper. Where playing *Burning Crusade* felt like being in the mosh pit at a Gwar concert, *Lich King*'s more like a girl playing guitar in a garden at night.

The garden in this case is the new sub-arctic continent of Northrend, a banana-shaped landmass in northern Azeroth that players (of any level) reach by new zeppelin towers or boats located outside their capitals (players without the expansion who try to stow away are unceremoniously dumped overboard on the nearest beach). From the verdant, steeply terraced Norse cliffs and wooden ski-lifts to the bejewelled energy rings of the island Coldarra off the west coast of the Borean Tundra, *Lich King* features some of the moodiest, lushest scenery Blizzard's artists have ever produced. Being confined to a frigid palette forced them into finding poetry in the starkly barren, the same way David Lean did in *Lawrence Of Arabia*. Though the engine is now almost five years old, new vertex shaders and shadow effects can be adjusted along with foliage density in five different levels. For the first time, *WOW*'s geography has a sense of authentic scale and depth.

Not that there aren't a few washouts: the relentless brown-on-brown Steam Springs evokes Desolace in all the wrong ways, just as the beginner instance Utgarde Keep in the Howling Fjord is little more than a perfunctory carbon copy of Outland's Hellfire Citadel, only with more giant staircases. Yet for the most part, Northrend's panoramas look stunning. There's a prevailing sense of ecological logic, and the layout is far less linear than Outland. Burning forests seamlessly give way to glades of crystalline foliage. Orcas and sea monsters swim in deep murky waters. Fissures widen in the middle of vast gelid mesas of dragon skeletons, revealing twisted ravines of icy caverns populated by scaly worms and scowling blue giants.

Depressingly, however, all this loveliness is once again put at the service of the same soulless collection/kill quests that seemed only slightly less tedious four years ago. Hack, grind, loot, backtrack, repeat. Kudos to Blizzard for snaking *LOTRO*'s Achievements tab, but we wish they'd also pilfered some of *Warhammer Online*'s nominally modern conveniences like queue-up-from-anywhere PvP battlegrounds and quest areas courteously highlighted in red on your minimap. Yes, mods like Quest Helper and sites like Thottbot exist to fill in these blanks, but the blanks are part of Blizzard's design. The question is why.

There are also the usual small betrayals, from the now-useless riding crops to dozens of lost mail items. And forcing players to grind for flying mounts. Again. Sure, they're cheaper, but is the process really more entertaining the second time?

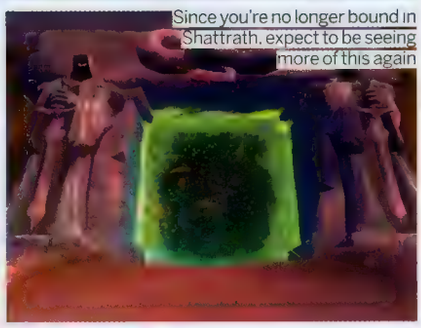
£ Play at all cost

Price to buy
£24.99 SRP
£17.99 Best price Amazon.co.uk

Price to play
£8.99 monthly
» 3 months: £8.39 monthly
» 6 months: £7.69 monthly

"Being confined to a frigid palette seems to have forced the artists into finding poetry in the starkly barren, the way David Lean did in Lawrence Of Arabia"

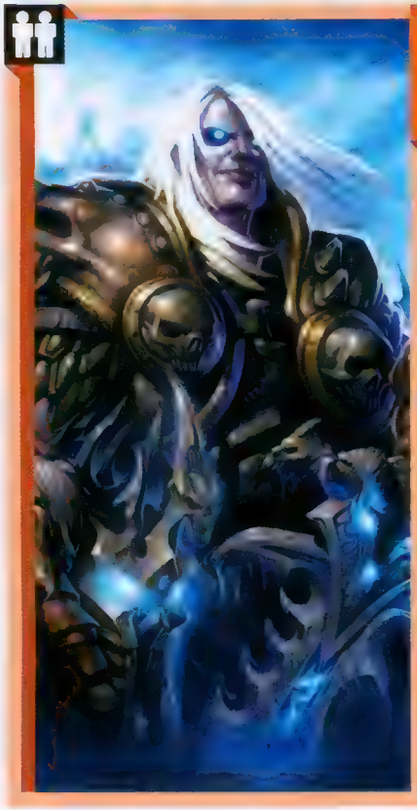
It's not what you're thinking, that's just a steam vent. I hope


Since you're no longer bound in Shattrath, expect to be seeing more of this again

Though part of its ostensible adherence to lore consistency, there's a high percentage of rehashed skins and architecture. Seriously, Blizzard, we love you, but what is it with the wriggling cocoons? Virtually every zone in Northrend features at least one pasture, cave or trench filled with writhing humanoid mummies, many of which contain either nothing or some kind of larva.

Add to all this the fact that the itemisation has been statistically nerfed to be more 'realistic' (ie disenchantable), along with an absence of class trainers, an auction house or easy direct access to Outland, and you might wonder what reason you'd have to visit Northrend at all.

The answer's simple: *Wrath Of The Lich King* is a cakewalk. The gold and experience points pile up like excelsior. Northrend elites three or four levels higher that quest logs sternly recommend bringing a group along for can be easily, if languorously, soloed. Even the end boss himself, Arthas the Lich King is allegedly ten-mannable (or will be, once deployed). Unsurprisingly, not everyone likes this aspect. On *WOW* forums, many hardcore veterans who eagerly signed up for 40-man Ahn'Qiraj raids are seething over this new casual-centric accessibility. But though they may post more, the pros are clearly no longer Blizzard's target demographic. And both commercially and creatively, it's a shift long overdue.



Putting the 'HK' back in Death Knight

» Those who found both of *BC*'s new playable races, the Blood Elves and the Draenei, overly swishy and inauthentic will probably find the charms of *Lich King*'s malevolent new hero class, the Death Knight, not just irresistible, but the expansion's single addiction. Available to anyone with a Level 55 character on any server, Level 55 Death Knights are instantly available regardless of faction, race, or gender.

A glitzy, endearingly hate-filled blend of the Warrior's martial prowess, the Rogue's pesky stun effects and the Warlock's misanthropy and necromantic DPS sorceries (powered by 'runes' represented by a sinister pale aquamarine mana bar rather than a dark blue one), the Death Knight is a versatile powerhouse, and terrific fun to pillage with. To read that his spell resources consist of three rune types (blood, frost, and unholy), each with two separate cooldown timers, makes managing him sound infinitely more complex and microintensive than he genuinely handles in practice (far more so than any of the expansion's vehicles). In fact, his very accessibility appears to be at the heart of complaints on forum boards (if such things still exist between now and press time) as to the Death Knight's outrageous overpowered-ness. As prescriptivists, we propose that anything called a Death Knight should by definition be more than adequately powered.

If the detractors have a legitimate gripe, it may indeed be that the Death Knight's opening quest chains are disproportionately more diverse, atmospheric and exhilarating than any other class' tutorials to date (except possibly for the interminable and unskippable dialogue exchange following a large-scale risk-free finale at Light's Hope Chapel that will have even young standards-free lore-hounds cringing after a whole read-through or two). From start to finish, the Death Knight's whirlwind gallivant of dragon-backed city sieges, duels, undead steed procural, runeforging and naval cannon bombardment is so brisk and storied, it makes the early Northrend chores that will come his way later look a bit wan in comparison.

"Those who found the Blood Elves and the Draenei overly swishy will probably find the charms of the Death Knight not just irresistible, but the expansion's single addiction"

Northrend's beginner instance Utgarde Keep is so brief, you'll feel like a Winterskorn Vyrkul shield-maiden on her wedding night (if they had weddings)

While the Death Knight's horse and voice acting live up to the hype, Blizzard's efforts at vehicular warfare are something of a perplexing disappointment. Designer Tom Chilton claimed that the company originally envisioned *WOW* as *Battlefield 1942* set in Azeroth, but from the clunky control schemes (Wii-style yellow trajectory arrows don't really lend themselves stylistically to the medieval) to the absence of high-speed velocities (even the Flintstone's car made better time), driving *Lich King*'s planes, trains and demolishers isn't quite the exhilarating rush you would hope for.

The problem isn't variety: *Lich King* features everything from stampeding mammoths to rocket-firing gyrocopters and saw-bladed goblin shredders, all capable of being driven, flown and crashed by human pilots, along with their navigators, gunners, and passengers. Yet only a few PvE quests make use of them. Clashing armadas is strictly the purview of the two new PvP battlefields.

The first of these, Strand of the Ancients, is geographically located just south of the Dragonblight in Northrend, although once players hit Level 71 they access it exclusively by queueing up via the proper NPC in Shattrath, Dalaran, Orgrimmar, or Stormwind and waiting.

Strand's premise is simple: an attacking team of up to 15 arrives in two boats, climbs into siege engines and besieges widely spaced gates of a keep lined with turrets manned by Horde defenders. The siege engines are both slow moving and slow to respawn, but are capable of long-range bombardment and tipped with devastating battering rams that make short work of the gates. The besiegers needs to punch their way through and 'capture' the relic at the heart of the keep (by touching it), while consolidating graveyards and dismantling turrets along the way. General defensive strategy consists of ignoring everything but the siege engines and yelling in battleground chat at others to ignore everything but the siege engines. When the relic is captured or the timer runs down to zero, attackers and defenders flip places, and the team with the shorter conquest time wins (in over 20 sessions, there was never a twice-uncaptured relic). While the demolishers are a potentially intriguing addition, Strand matches tend to be brief, which isn't a problem, but the linear nature of the objectives make the sessions feel interchangeable and somewhat forgettable.

At the other extreme, commitment-wise, is Lake Wintergrasp, *WOW*'s first ever un-instanced outdoor all-PvP zone. A Westfall-sized valley nestled between Northrend's Sholazar Basin (Ungoro Crater minus pterodactyls) and Dragonblight, Lake Wintergrasp is only accessible by flying mount, making it out of reach to any characters below Level 77.

The focus in Wintergrasp is a gold mine situated near Wintergrasp Fortress, a keep controlled by one faction or another depending on a preset schedule. Surrounding this prime real estate is a substantial acreage of snow-covered hills populated by Level 80 elementals and their Level 76 elite entourages, along with more powerful vapours called Reverents that are only visible to the side controlling the Keep. Farming the Reverents is essentially the point of Wintergrasp, since they drop special crystallised currency called stone keeper's shards (*WOTLK*'s version of motes), which are used as currency for buying new PvP gear, jewelcrafting recipes and other sundries.

So to get these shards, factions war over control of the Fortress, with siege workshops and a wide array of quasi-tactical mini-quests littering the landscape to help spice up this long slog of attrition. A lot of the quests are actually quite engaging, from aerial bomber runs to SWAT team rope evacuations and acts of explosive sabotage, but unless you're lucky enough to be in a large, highly skilled preset group, successful co-ordination of all these miscellaneous combat operations varies wildly depending on the server and hour of the day.

Part of Wintergrasp's problem is motivation. Besides enabling the controlling faction to loot the precious shards, fortress occupation also gives every member of the faction in Northrend a 5 per

No Mere Mortal Can Withstand
Deathguard Schneider slain: 0/ 1
Senior Scrivener Ilantiya slain: 0/ 1
Engineer Burke slain: 0/ 1
Chancellor Amal slain: 0/ 1
The Focus on the Beach
Ley line focus information retrieved: 0/ 1
From the Depths of Azjol-Nerub
Pit of Narjun Explored
The Plains of Nasam
Scourge Leader identified
Scourge Unit obliterated: 99/ 100
Injured Warsong Soldier rescued: 3/3
Undying Aggressor
Level 69 Undead

Strand of the Ancients offers players a chance to drive mobile siege engines

cent XP bonus, which is definitely a short-term perk. Holding off the attackers for a sufficient time unlocks an embarrassingly lightweight raid-boss, Archavon the Stone Keeper, who drops much sought-after bind-to-account tier-seven heirloom items (items that can be shuttled between any characters on the same account). Though the scale and even chaos of Wintergrasp make it an attractive stopover, it seems peculiar to make an NPC boss the 'reward'. After Alterac, doesn't Blizzard know that NPCs suck the life out of battlegrounds? There's a reason why no one ever wistfully mentions Korrak the Bloodrager.

Beneath all the rollercoasters, there's plenty of lighter fare to fiddle with. There are new cloth types, new bag sizes, chests with padlocks of even stronger alloys, underground insect cities, a beefed-up Naxxramas, new pet and achievement tabs, new fish to catch and new spells and abilities to upgrade. The new profession, Inscription, lets practitioners manufacture permanent scrollwork buffs linkable to items as well as spells, or even to the character himself in the form of soulbound 'glyphs'. Though beneficial, inscriptions involve using both herbal and alchemical materials, blithely disrupting the most self-contained, symmetrical crafting/manufacturing dyad in the *WOW* economy.

For all its vehicles and Death Knights, *WOW*'s core bread-and-butter gameplay remains unchanged. It may feel faintly narcotising, but at the same time it's cathartic: your characters are now virtually indestructible, finally the masters of their environment, vulnerable only to each other. Now any average punk can conceivably earn the game's greatest rewards without subjecting themselves to 40-man raid politics and 'Dragon Kill Point' systems, an arcane player-created necessity that four years later Blizzard has yet to improve on.

Yet *Wrath Of The Lich King* features some of the best visual content in any MMO yet, and its casualness and accessibility, the things for which it's being condemned by the hardcore, are the very qualities with which Blizzard's brand was once so synonymous. That being said, if Blizzard really wants to make Battlefield set in Azeroth, the first thing it should do is dump all that domesticated MMO stuff.

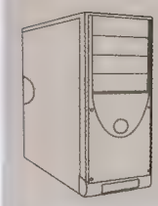
Kelly Wand

Level up

Just how hard is it to get ahead of the crowd?

» Within only 36 hours of launch, realm first announcements were already popping up across various servers: "So-and-so has reached Level 80." While sleep, eating, and bio breaks may admittedly be only for the softcore, *Wrath Of The Lich King* (thankfully) has as quick and painless a levelling arc as ever. If you're in a rush to get to 71, go west to the Borean Tundra

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU Pentium 4 1.3 GHz
RAM 512MB/1GB for Vista
GRAPHICS GPU with hardware transform and lighting and 32MB VRAM

We say

Even with the shadow system and vertex modifications Lich King introduces, the graphics engine is almost five years old. It runs smoother than any game you're likely to have on your system that came out after XP.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

»maximum detail

Foliage is dense and character models look solid

»minimum detail

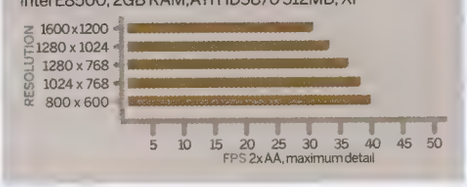
At the lowest settings, *Lich King* doesn't look far removed from how *WOW* looked back in 2004

»Technical tip

You don't need to upgrade your whole system, but having a graphics processor with vertex and shader capabilities help take advantage of the expansion's subtler nuances.

»fps vs resolution

Intel E8500, 2GB RAM, ATI HD3870 512MB, XP



Verdict

8

Northrend is a great place to chill, but Blizzard's efforts to bring the actual craft of war isn't quite as cool.

In three words **Big. Opulent. Roomy.**

LOTRO: MINES OF MORIA

Wow! Nice house Mr Durin VI. Shame about the gigantic demon in the cellar, though

Details | **GENRE** Tolkien-esque MMORPG | **DEVELOPER** Turbine
PUBLISHER Codemasters Online | **WEB** www.lotro-europe.com/minesofmoria

Standing before us is one the biggest and most intimidating MMO bosses we've ever encountered, and the fact that we've been anticipating it does nothing to relieve the tension. We're told the Balrog is a 50-foot gargantuan, and with 513,250 hit points, you could say it's got a pretty good chin too – it absorbs the mightiest of Durin's haymakers with the nonchalance of an elephant being attacked by a mosquito. But even as the Lord Of Fire And Shadow uses the ancient king of Khazad-Dum as a doormat before plodding dramatically towards us, fanning a massive wingspan and orange flame licking around the dark orifice of its maw, we're too busy being awestruck to run away. Besides, this isn't David versus Goliath, it's more like a career-peak Tyson-monster versus a foetal joey. This has to be some kind of cinematic, Turbine wouldn't seriously unleash such a ridiculously one-sided contest on its players, would it?

The Balrog finishes our instance with a single stomp for a gazillion hit points of damage, or enough to wipe out an entire raid, at least. Fortunately, this is actually single-player session-play and the character that we were playing wasn't our own, but the son of Durin: a Level 60 Dwarf of some unknown tank class called Nafni. You'll have the opportunity to play this quest a few hours into the new *Mines Of Moria* expansion for *Lord Of The Rings Online*, and it will take you to a solo instance similar to Monster Play, where you'll vicariously earn destiny points for your main character, rather than XP. Turbine has woven this retrospective story seamlessly into the *Mines Of Moria* content to form the historical backdrop to the new Volume II epic quests, and it has done a fine job with the rest, especially as there's a fair whack to see, do and learn.

But most of the first book of Volume II is pretty mundane; nothing the seasoned Level 50+ characters that swarm around the Walls Of Moria won't be used to: collecting wood, slaying wolves and chatting to people is the bread and butter of any MMO. There are special expedition side-quests, bordering on small Fellowship-difficulty, that can only be completed prior to entering Moria, but these are hardly exceptional. Just when we were beginning to wander if we'd ever get past the Doors Of Durin and explore the fabled mountain kingdom, things took an exciting turn.

Chapter eight of book one, Volume II onward proves fascinating for anyone who has grafted their way up to Eregion and beyond. It's an instance that will take you to an area that anyone who has watched the Peter Jackson films, or even those that have read the description in Tolkien's novel, will immediately recognise. The atmosphere around Black Pool outside Durin's Door is palpable, and our anticipation of the inevitable appearance of the Watcher is heightened by several dwarves skimming stones off the surface of the water. Unfortunately, the first encounter with the Watcher is a bit of an anticlimax – nowhere near the epic that was the Balrog instance, but it does lead onto several far more interesting quests that introduce you to the Legendary Item system.

Item advancement isn't an original idea for an MMORPG, it's been used quite extensively in *Dark Age Of Camelot*, for one. But Turbine has dealt with the concept as masterfully as ever, making the Legendary Item system its own. These items are dropped by mobs or given as quest rewards and, unless you acquire a particularly rare and powerful Legendary Item, are usually slightly less powerful than the equivalent kit of the same level. But equip it on your character and it can gain experience for kills too, levelling up and acquiring advancement points that can be exchanged to boost any of its bonuses. It can also be equipped with relics, setting and gems for additional bonuses, further enhancing its abilities. This massively extends gameplay considering it takes as long, if not longer, to fully equip your character with Legendary

Level up

Just how hard is it to get ahead of the crowd?

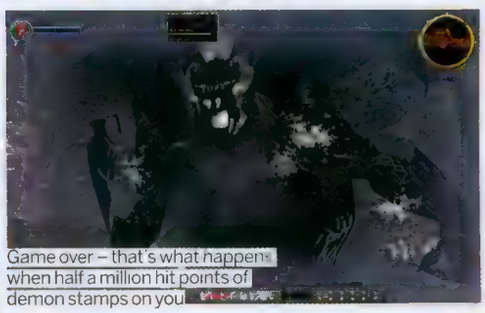
» Levels 50 to 60 isn't quite the graft you'd expect it to be. With a few side-quests thrown in you'll probably gain a level for each book of Volume II you complete, for the early part of the new epic quests, at least. A level a day is easily within reach for serious MMO gamer and even at less than two weeks into the release of this retail expansion, there are plenty of Level 60 characters on each server. Filling your item slots with Legendary items can take longer, however, and levelling them to your satisfaction is a completely different game in itself.

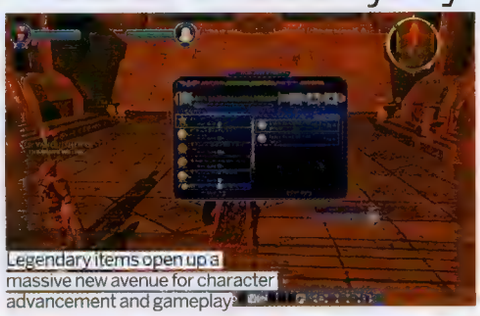
£ Play at all cost

Price to buy
£19.99 SRP
£14.98 Best price
Amazon.co.uk

Price to play
£8.99 monthly
» £149.99 lifetime membership

"This isn't David versus Goliath, it's more like a career-peak Tyson-monster versus a foetal joey"


Game over – that's what happens when half a million hit points of demon stamps on you


Legendary items open up a massive new avenue for character advancement and gameplay

Different worlds

Exploring the far reaches of the Gurhal system

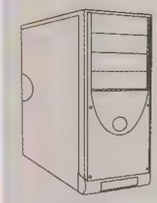
» Don't be deceived by the relatively mundane experience just beyond the portal that takes you from Eregion into the *Mines Of Moria* expansion content. The Walls Of Moria is hardly a remarkable area, but it's just a warm-up to the main event. The mountain kingdom itself is a visual feast, most unlike anything we've witnessed in any other MMO. The quests are both epic and otherwise don't change much, but within the context of *Moria*, moving through the strata of difficulty to the dangerous depths, you get definite sense of old-school dungeon-crawling, especially as a part of a Fellowship.

kit and max it out as it does to level a character from one to 50. You'll also spend an awful lot of time popping back and forth from the Forge-Masters, the only guys capable of slotting, identifying, reforging and combining Legendary Items, just to perfect the kit you have.

Probably the best part of the *Mines Of Moria* expansion, of course, is when you first walk beyond the western doors and into the kingdom itself. It's both huge in proportions and expanse. You could fit Buckingham Palace into a single corridor, and in some of the halls you can't even see the ceiling. The Dwarves are only just beginning to claw this territory back for themselves, so despite the odd outpost, Moria gets progressively more dangerous the further and deeper you delve. Despite crawling with excitable players, there's a feeling of dungeon-crawling and exploration that's rare in fantasy MMOs. It's a real treat for current *LOTRO* players around the previous Level 50 XP cap, and well worth working towards if you're still catching up in Eriador.

Ben Biggs

Tech specs



»requirements

CPU P4 2GHz
RAM 1GB
GRAPHICS 128MB DX9 compatible

We say

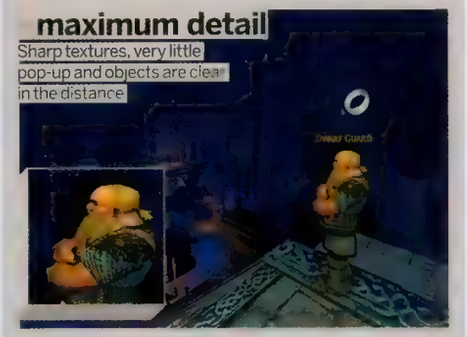
Moria is crowded at the moment, and the scale of your environment coupled with multiple players and NPCs in communal areas means this minimum specification will choke on all but the lowest settings.

Performance anxiety

How do the graphic settings affect the look of the game?

maximum detail

Sharp textures, very little pop-up and objects are clear in the distance



minimum detail

Gameplay is impacted as landmarks appear only in the foreground

»Technical tip

For well-populated areas in The Great Delving, it's best to push player crowd detail (a slider accessible in the normal graphic settings) fairly low to increase performance.

»fps vs resolution

Intel Q6850 3GHz, 2GB RAM, 8800GTX, XP

Verdict

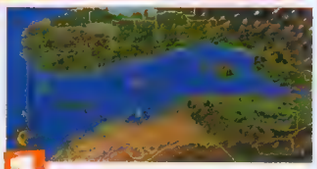
Players who previously hit the XP cap will find gameplay far beyond the extra experience levels that *Moria* boasts.

8

directory GAMES

The **TPCG** MMO directory: for gamers with a few thousand hours to kill

Top three... Offline MMO substitutes



1 DAGGERFALL
» *Daggerfall* boasts a 161,600 square kilometre world populated by nearly 1 million NPCs. It was randomly generated, but those figures should blow most MMOs well out of the water.

2 MIGHT & MAGIC IX
» The last in the *Might & Magic* series had similar technology, setting and world size to that of *EverQuest*. You could also team up with up to five others in a network.

3 FALLOUT 3
» With draw distances maxed out, Bethesda's latest triple-A title looks and feels as free-roaming as any MMO. NPC migration and an evolving landscape are a sound replacement for the player-generated organics of MMOs.

DISCWORLD MUD
» Graphical interfaces are for wussies. The old-school and real hardcore MMO gamers use a keyboard and their imagination to play.

Top three... New MMO franchises

1 KOTOR
» Backed by EA, licensed by LucasArts and developed by BioWare – EA chief John Riccitiello confirmed the development of *Star Wars: The Old Republic* in July.

2 GUITAR HERO
» It's by no means official, but Activision's president hasn't ruled a *Guitar Hero* MMO out, "Those are things that fall into the realm of opportunity for us in the future."

3 THE ELDER SCROLLS
» Rumours keep circulating on an *Elder Scrolls* MMO, but Bethesda keeps shooting them down despite registering an **elderscrollsonline.com** domain. "We're content with a single-player game," Pete Hines said recently.

NAME OF GAME	PRICE TO BUY	PRICE TO PLAY	WEBSITE
9Dragons	Free	Free	9dragons.acclaim.com
A free martial arts MMO from Acclaim, with optional micropayments for buying extra items			
Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	£34.99	£10.34	www.ageofconan.com
Chop people up, drink booze, leer over slave girls and meet King Conan. Now this is an MMO!			
Anarchy Online	Free	Free	www.anarchy-online.com
It's looking worse for wear, but this sci-fi MMORPG is totally free and still very enjoyable			
Asheron's Call: Throne Of Destiny	£14.99	$12.95 P/M	ac.turbine.com
Magic meets aliens in this classic tale of survival against insurmountable odds			
City Of Heroes/City Of Villains	£14.99	£8.99 P/M	www.cityofheroes.com
Play the goodies or the baddies with one subscription in this comic book MMO			
Dark Age Of Camelot	Free	£8 P/M	daoc.goa.com/en
Go medieval with this classic online RPG set in ancient Albion during Arthurian times			
Dungeons & Dragons Online	£2.99	$14.99 P/M	www.ddo-europe.com
Fantasy MMO based on the tabletop RPG with action-driven gameplay			
Eve Online	£14.99	€14.95 P/M	www.eve-online.com
An MMO set in deep space focusing on five races of humanity and the Eve Gate			
EverQuest	£12.99	$14.99 P/M	everquest.station.sony.com
The blockbusting fantasy MMO is still going strong, and it's now great value for money			
EverQuest II	£19.99	£9.49	www.everquest2.com
Join thousands of players in the land of Norrath. The latest expansion includes all previous add-ons			
Final Fantasy XI: Online	£14.98	$12.95	www.playonline.com/ff11us/index.shtml
The first *Final Fantasy* game to be played online. The land of Vana'diel is in peril and only you can save it			
Flyff	Free	Free	gpotato.com
As the name suggests, *Fly For Fun* is all about flying around. It's a cute anime MMO, nuff said			
Guild Wars Complete Collection	£34.99	Free	www.guildwars.com
Retail MMO with no monthly fee. Includes the original game and all four expansion packs			
Hellgate: London	£34.99	£6.95 (optional)	www.hellgatelondon.com
Not just a single-player ARPG, *Hellgate* has all the trappings of an MMO: guilds, parties, chat, trading and, yes, a subscription			
Knight Online	Free	Free	www.knightonlineworld.com
The world's fourth most-played MMO. It's free, but does offer additional content for premium members			
The Legend Of Mir 3	Free	£4.99	www.lom3europe.com
A typically impenetrable Korean MMO, but it's one of the best if you're into grinding and levelling			
Lineage II	£9.99	£8.99	eu.lineage2.com
A medieval MMO, Korean style, where knights and magical creatures clash head-on			
LOTR Online: Shadows Of Angmar	£14.99	£8.99 P/M	www.lotro-europe.com
Could Frodo, Gandalf and co be enough to tempt players away from *World Of Warcraft*?			
The Matrix Online	$19.95	$14.99 P/M	thematrixonline.station.sony.com
Neo and company gang up against a relentless army of Agent Smiths. Perfect MMO subject material			
Phantasy Star Universe	£29.99	£6.99 P/M	www.phantasystaruniverse.com
Play on or offline in this continuation of the classic Sega RPG			
Pirates Of The Burning Sea	£24.99	$14.99	www.burningsea.com
Pirates are most definitely en vogue, so this has to be the first MMO that makes players cool, right?			
Planetarion	Free	Free	www.planetarion.com
A browser-based MMO places gamers in control of a planet, mining its asteroids for resources and sending fleets of spaceships against other players			
Planetside	£2.99	$14.99	planetside.station.sony.com
Jump into powered armour, tanks, buggies, aircraft and wield all manner of guns in this MMOFPS			
Runescape	Free	Free (optional P/M)	www.runescape.com
The second-most subscribed MMO in the world and utterly different from the world of Azeroth			
Star Wars Galaxies (complete)	£32.99	$14.99	starwarsgalaxies.station.sony.com
Despite SOE's best attempts at killing it, *SWG* is still going and is a great experience for die-hard *Star Wars* fans			
Tabula Rasa	£19.99	£8.99	www.rgtr.com
Richard Garriot returns with a sci-fi MMORPG that's heavy on the action			
Ultima Online	£14.99	$12.99	www.uoherald.com/news
A classic among MMOs that is set in the land of Britannia and has spawned no less than seven expansions			
Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes	£17.99	$14.99	vanguard.station.sony.com
Set in the land of Thestra, this RPG was released earlier last year and is fast becoming a cult hit			
Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning	£34.99	£8.99	www.warhammeronline.com
Arguably the biggest and smoothest MMO launch ever, *WAR* is proving incredibly popular and tempting more than a few from the wonders of *WOW*			
World Of Warcraft	£9.99	£18.00 for 60 days	www.wow-europe.com
The game that needs no introduction – 11 million players worldwide can't be wrong			

See? Your list of broadband options isn't that scary

Top three... Surprise heavyweights

1 RUNESCAPE
» With a 7.5 per cent share of the subscriptions market, the oft-overlooked *Runescape* is a long way behind *WOW* (at 62.2 per cent), but the daddy of browser MMOs still comes in second place.

2 FINAL FANTASY XI
» Despite the criticism, the *Final Fantasy* name still carries some clout in the MMO community. With a 3.1 per cent share, bashing killer bees can't be bothering the *FFXI* crowd too much.

3 DOFUS
» Not a flightless bird made extinct in the 17th Century, but a Flash-based fantasy MMO that falls into sixth place in terms of worldwide subscriptions with a 2.8 per cent market share.

Top three... Biggest MMO genres

1 FANTASY
» No points for guessing which genre tops the subscription table. Fantasy takes up a fair chunk of the MMO market – an impressive 94.2 per cent, in fact.

2 SCIENCE FICTION
» *Tabula Rasa*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *The Matrix Online*, *City Of Heroes/ Villains* and other sci-fi subscription MMOs make up 3.7 per cent of the market.

3 COMBAT SIM
» Coming in at a diminutive 0.2 per cent of the subscription market share, combat sim MMOs like World War II flight simulator *Warbirds* are the third most played genre.

directory BROADBAND FOR GAMING

Just like the early days of the internet, broadband was restricted to those tech-savvy enough to take the plunge. While modern broadband connections usually come with clear and simple setup instructions, many service providers will send a technician to your home to ensure you hit the ground running. Technophobes needn't fear deciphering a load of jargon before getting online – it should be no more hassle than pressing the power button on your PC.

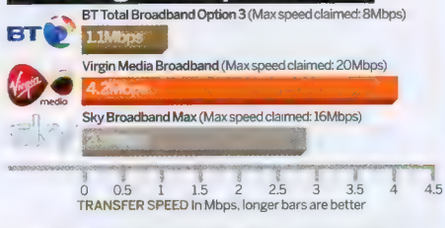
PROVIDER	PACKAGE	COST P/M	SPEED	D/L LIMIT	CONTRACT	WEBSITE
Be*	Be Unlimited	£18.00	24Mb	Unlimited*	3 months	www.bethere.co.uk
BT	BT Option 3	£24.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	www.bt.com
Bulldog	Unlimited Plus	£24.50	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.bulldogbroadband.com
Demon	Home 8000	£17.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.demon.net
Eclipse	Home Pro	£29.99	8Mb	50GB	12 months	www.eclipse.net.uk
Fast4	Max Pro	£15.95	24Mb	30GB	12 months	www.fast4.net
FMN	ADSL	£41.99	8Mb	Unlimited	3 months	www.fmn.uk.net
Madasafish	Max Premier	£25.99	8Mb	50GB	12 months	www.madasafish.com
02	Ultimate	£20.00	20Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	broadband.o2.co.uk
Orange	Orange Home Max	£24.00	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	orange.co.uk/shop
Pipex	Pipex Pro	£39.99	8Mb	100GB	12 months	www.pipex.co.uk
Sky	Broadband Max	£10	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.sky.com/broadband
TalkTalk	Talk Global	£16.99	8Mb	40GB	18 months	www.talktalk.co.uk
Tiscali	Broadband Only	£14.99	8Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.tiscali.co.uk
UK Online	Premier	£24.99	16Mb	Unlimited*	12 months	www.ukonline.net
Virgin media	Virgin Media XL (cable)	£23.50	8Mb	Unlimited*	18 months	www.virginmedia.com

* Fair usage policy applies

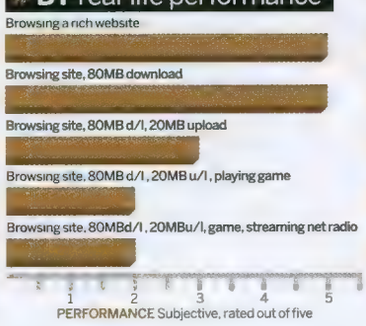
Gaming broadband explained

Broadband can be accessed using wireless or satellite for specialised use, but the most common types used in the UK come in two different flavours via the existing telephone infrastructure. ADSL (Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line) uses technology in your telephone line and can be used at the same time as your phone, and cable broadband requires a separate cable being run into your home from the street or your cable TV – usually provided as a package with a cable TV upgrade. The download rates are comparable between the two, but you may well find that one service will be easier to get in your area.

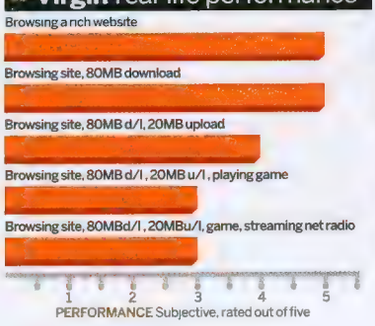
» The big three speed tested


BT Total Broadband Option 3 (Max speed claimed: 8Mbps)
1.1Mbps
Virgin Media Broadband (Max speed claimed: 20Mbps)
4.2Mbps
Sky Broadband Max (Max speed claimed: 16Mbps)
0 0.5 1 1.5 2 2.5 3 3.5 4 4.5
TRANSFER SPEED In Mbps, longer bars are better

» BT real-life performance


Browsing a rich website
Browsing site, 80MB download
Browsing site, 80MB d/l, 20MB upload
Browsing site, 80MB d/l, 20MB u/l, playing game
Browsing site, 80MBd/l, 20MBu/l, game, streaming net radio
1 2 3 4 5
PERFORMANCE Subjective, rated out of five

» Virgin real-life performance


Browsing a rich website
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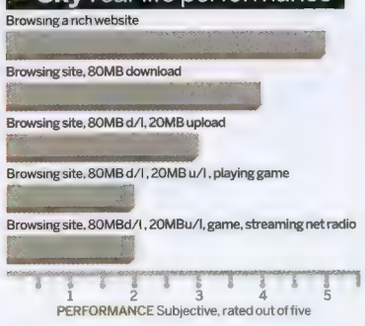
Browsing site, 80MB d/l, 20MB u/l, playing game
Browsing site, 80MBd/l, 20MBu/l, game, streaming net radio
1 2 3 4 5
PERFORMANCE Subjective, rated out of five

» Sky real-life performance


Browsing a rich website
Browsing site, 80MB download
Browsing site, 80MB d/l, 20MB upload
Browsing site, 80MB d/l, 20MB u/l, playing game
Browsing site, 80MBd/l, 20MBu/l, game, streaming net radio
1 2 3 4 5
PERFORMANCE Subjective, rated out of five

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THE ULTIMATE GAMING CASE REVEALED!

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»Fed up with a niggling technical problem? Get it off your chest right here...

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Rock's latest gaming laptop features higher specs than we see in some desktop systems

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Another incredibly highly specced laptop – this time it's from Chillblast

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ROCK XTREME 780
» One of the fastest laptops on the market today?

HIS RADEON HD4830
» HIS and ATI assault the mainstream graphics market

LG FLATRON W2271TC
» Find out how LG's latest screen fares

ZALMAN CNPS 9300AT
» Another work of art from Zalman

Group test

GAMING CASES

With today's video cards churning out more heat than ever, choosing the right case is every bit as important as getting the rest of the spec right. This month we're comparing four of the best gaming chassis, designed to keep even the most demanding components chilly

It doesn't matter if you have the fastest PC on the planet, if it's housed in something plain, no one is going to take any notice. Looking boring certainly isn't a criticism that could be aimed at our four contenders this month, however, with each of them looking fabulous in their own way. Aesthetics are always down to personal preference, with one man's perfect case being another's nightmare. Whether you prefer the sumptuously understated luxurious look, or the brash arrogance of neon lights and heavy venting, we have something for you in this issue's shoot-out.

While a case's aesthetics are a matter of opinion, the rest of our criteria are much more universal. To compare our contenders we installed a high-spec gaming machine into each, giving marks for ease of build, cooling ability, quietness and quality of finish. We will also be looking at each from a value-for-money standpoint, as if spending more than £100 on a chassis, you certainly want to feel like you are getting your money's worth. »

£246
» Lian Li PC-X500
If we were giving out points for being unorthodox, the Lian Li would certainly get top marks

£179
» Cooler Master Cosmos S RC-1100
Can the extravagantly expensive and capacious RC-1100 justify its price tag?

£105 » Antec Twelve Hundred

Another full tower aimed at gamers, can the Twelve Hundred match its smaller brother's quality?

FAQ

How important is the construction material of a case?

» In a modern gaming case, only a tiny proportion of the heat is lost by conduction, with the rest of it being expelled through case fans and venting. This makes the construction material a less important factor than it once was. Nevertheless, aluminium is far lighter than steel and can also be presented as bare anodised metal, which is usually a much more attractive finish than any paint job.

Why should I spend more than £25 on the case?

» You can easily spend less than £25 on a PC case these days, and some of these budget offerings even come with PSUs. While they are fine for simple office boxes, none that we have seen have cooling adequate for a modern gaming PC. A case containing a powerful video card should have at least two 120mm fans – preferably more – and be roomy enough to accommodate ultra-long 10.5-inch cards.

£85 » Hiper Osiris

It's unusual to see an aluminium case cost under £100 – has Hiper cut some corners along the way?

LIAN LI TYR PC-X500

£246

Quite simply the wackiest case we have ever seen

Web Manufacturer: www.lian-li.com Supplier: www.lian-li.com

Lian Li has a heritage in case building that few can rival. Classics like the PC-60 and V-1000 still look fabulous almost a decade after being released, and the enduring quality of the Taiwan-based manufacturer's products never ceases to impress. However, with the X500, Lian Li could be accused of losing its marbles, as we have never seen such a bizarre layout as this one. Cases with doors that hide the drives are nothing new, but behind the X500's plain front panel you'll just find two 120mm fans and a dust filter. Bizarrely, the X500's drive bays are actually housed on the side of the case. This isn't quite as restrictive as it sounds, as either side can be used, though not at the same time. This means you should still be able to use the X500 whether you keep your system on the right or left side of the desk.

Every part of the X500 is made from aluminium, with each panel anodised in black. Its lines are incredibly sleek and refined, and you will not find a single sharp edge on either the inside or outside of this case. The PSU tray is right behind the 3.5-inch and 5.25-inch bays at the top, and is unfortunately rather restrictive. Oversized PSUs like the Thermaltake Tough Power or Corsair HX 1000W models will definitely not fit, or at least not without an ugly overhang at the back. Elsewhere, you get plenty of room to play with, as there is more than enough space for extremely long video cards. This is because the Lian Li holds its hard disks at the top of the case rather than at the front.

Overall, we found the X500 a rather difficult and fiddly case to deal with. While building our test system into the Hiper Osiris took about half an hour, we had to struggle for more than twice as long to get things looking neat and tidy in the Lian Li. Properly securing the optical drives was particularly fiddly, and woe betide anyone that wants to add a Blu-Ray drive later. With the optical drives installed, the sleek looks of the X500 are spoiled, and although Lian Li sells its C-01 stealth bezels separately, we were very disappointed not to see a couple bundled with this very expensive case.

With a quartet of 120mm fans, the Lian Li is capable of keeping the most demanding systems under control, though its lack of any direct video card cooling makes it less suitable for an SLI or CrossFire system than some of the competition. The fans provided with the X500 are of high quality, and were only just audible when controlled by our Asus motherboard's rpm control system. Noise dampening has also been considered for the hard drives, with each drive fitted to a small rubber grommet, and both side panels are coated in a foam insulation material.

Despite its extremely odd layout, inflated price tag and fiddly installation, the sheer build quality of the PC-X500 will be enough for many to forgive its foibles. Every panel has that Mercedes Benz quality that oozes class, and although it looks better before you add your hardware, we think it's an absolutely stunning-looking piece of kit.

Verdict

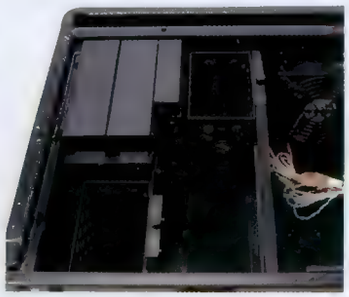
»Overall The Lian Li TYR PC-X500 is a triumph of aesthetics and build quality, but its layout doesn't quite work as well as it could. Also, £246 for a case is a ludicrous amount of money.

7

Head-to-head The main features compared

Cooling

» The Lian Li PC-X500 is split into two distinct chambers. The top section houses the optical drives, a single 3.5-inch external device, four hard drives and the PSU. The lower section contains the rest of your hardware and is cooled by two 120mm fans that bring air into the case, while a single 120mm exhaust is right next to the CPU cooler. The final 120mm fan is in the top section and helps cool the hard disks. This layout provided an impressively cool ambient temperature, though our video cards were far hotter in this case than they were in others with a side-mounted unit.



Bays and features

» If you have more than a couple of 5.25-inch bays to fit into your gaming machine, the PC-X500 certainly won't be for you. Only two are provided, along with a single external 3.5-inch bay. Hard drives are also sparingly catered for, as you can only fit a total of four into the cramped top section. Front panel connectivity is excellent, with the Lian Li sporting FireWire, USB 2.0, eSATA and audio headers as standard. It's also nice to see built-in filters on each of the fans, which will greatly reduce the build up of fluff and dust getting into your case.

All of the X500's side panels are made of thick aluminium that has been anodised in black and noise-insulated. Unusually for a Lian Li model, there is no silver version

Two sets of 5.25-inch bays are on each side panel, but only the left or right can be used at once, not both at the same time. The position of the bays also greatly limits your choice of PSUs, as only small ATX-sized models fit properly

The main chamber is spacious and well-cooled. Even the largest video cards are easily accommodated, and although we would have liked to have seen dedicated cooling for the video cards, the three 140mm fans do a good job

COOLER MASTER COSMOS RC-1100 S

£179

The Cylon-esque Cosmos RC-1100 is a giant among cases

Web Manufacturer: www.coolermaster.com Supplier: www.chillblast.com

Cooler Master used to only make high-quality aluminium cases in the Lian Li mould, but its offerings in recent years have been far more accessible to the mainstream. The Cosmos S RC-1100 represents the firm's current flagship, and has a host of interesting features that make it stand out from the rest. The interior of the case and both of the side panels are made from aluminium, making it far lighter than the incredibly heavy standard Cosmos, though the front, top and rear have all been coated in plastic. While this may make the RC-1100 sound cheap, the build quality is good enough that you won't worry too much about it. In addition to the Cylon-inspired red strip on the front, the Cosmos has other futuristic features that we have yet to see elsewhere. For example, the power button is illuminated even when the PC is turned off and is touch-sensitive, with just the gentlest of nudges needed to power the system up.

The case's connectivity is covered by a sliding cover, and once again consists of a full set of ports. Four USBs, FireWire, audio and eSATA are all present and correct, meaning you will rarely have to go to the back of your PC in order to plug anything in. The Cosmos's bay layout is the same flexible design we first saw in the Cooler Master Stacker, and consists of ten 5.25-inch bays. Three of these bays are taken up as standard by a four-in-three module, which as its name suggests, holds four hard disks. If you want to increase this storage capacity later, further modules can be purchased separately. Each module also has a 120mm intake fan.

The rest of the case's cooling is taken care of by a trio of 120mm exhaust fans, two of which sit along the top of the case, with one in the usual position at the back. There is also a single 200mm fan on the side panel that provides dedicated cooling for hot video cards. This makes the Cosmos S the perfect choice for those wanting an SLI or CrossFire setup. This fan is quite loud at full-speed, however, so make sure you have it rpm-controlled by your motherboard if possible.

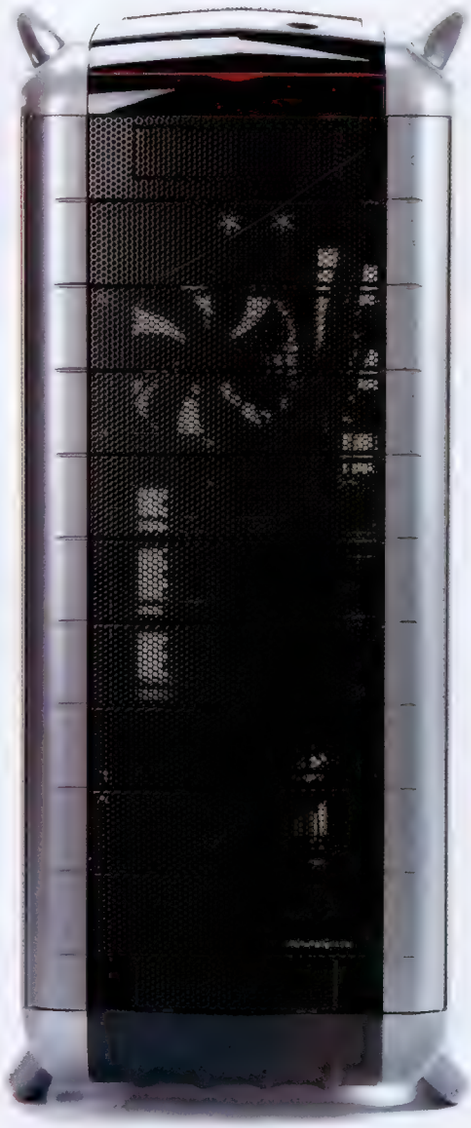
For water cooling purposes, the Cosmos S is second to none, with the capability to accommodate a triple 120mm radiator along the top without modification. There is also bags of space inside to mount reservoirs, pumps and water blocks, all without ever having to venture outside of the chassis. There are also plenty of fan mounts to add yet more cooling, making this large case ideal for enthusiasts.

While there is much to like about the Cosmos S, we are not convinced by its extremely high price tag. Although aluminium is the material of choice, we can't see enough of it being used to justify costing over twice as much as the Hiper.

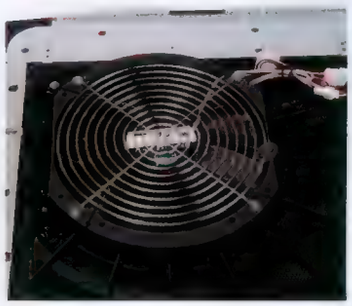
Verdict

»Overall The Cosmos S is a spectacular case with bags of cooling and special features, but only the elite few will be able to justify its colossally inflated £179 price tag.

8

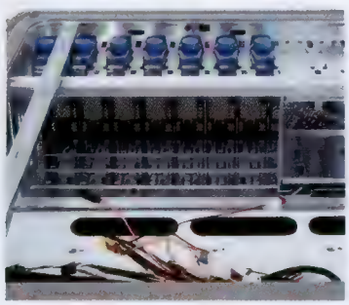


»Head-to-head The main features compared



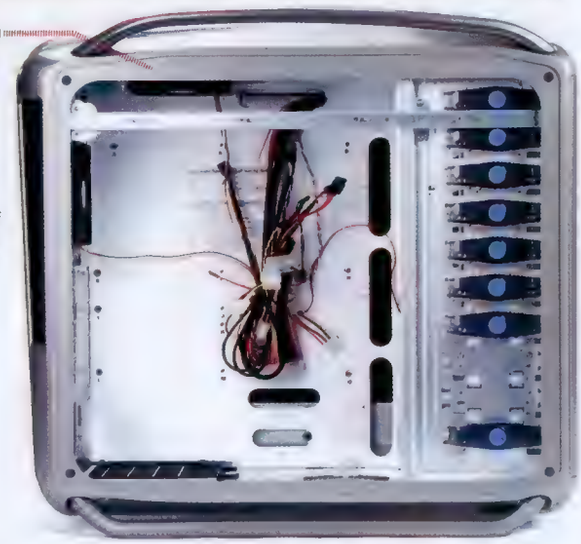
Cooling

»With a total of four 120mm fans as well as a 200mm monster on the side panel, the Cosmos S is more than ready to accommodate even triple video card setups. Some of the fans could be quieter, but were fine once subdued by our motherboard's built-in control. The four-in-three drive module has rubber grommets to reduce vibrations, and it's just as well as the bezels all down the front of the case are quite loose.



Bays and features

»The Cosmos S has an impressive set of 5.25-inch bays all down its front, each of which can also be used to accommodate hard drives with extra four-in-three modules. While this does add a great deal of flexibility, having to remove the whole unit just to add or remove a single drive is cumbersome and fiddly, especially as the modules don't seem to fit all that well. Every connectivity feature you could want is present and correct, and we really love the touch-sensitive power button and *Battlestar Galactica*-inspired styling.



With three 120mm fan mounts along the top panel, the Cosmos S is one of a select few cases that can accommodate a full-size water cooling radiator without any sort of modification at all

ANTEC TWELVE HUNDRED

£105

Can Antec's flagship mix it with the aluminium competition?

Web Manufacturer: www.antec.com Supplier: www.chillblast.com

Antec's Nine Hundred was a great polariser of opinion here at Total PC Gaming HQ, with some of us loving the angular, futuristic exterior and others dismissing it as downright ugly. Fortunately, the Twelve Hundred has had a few aesthetic tweaks to its design and we now all agree it's a good-looking, if rather boy-racer-inspired chassis. With its transparent side panel and heavily vented front, it's still not subtle, but this brash appearance hides a sophisticated and extremely well-thought-out design. As a full-tower, the Twelve Hundred is extremely roomy, with a flexible drive assembly similar to the Cosmos S. But instead of including just one hard disk caddy, Antec provides three. Each drive cage holds three hard disks and takes up three 5.25-inch bays. This gives the Antec unrivalled capacity, making it an excellent choice for those needing lots of storage.

As with its smaller brother, the Antec Twelve Hundred's top panel is dominated by a huge 200mm cooling fan. Elsewhere, there are also two rear 120mm units and three 120mm intakes, with one fitted to each hard drive bay. Ingeniously, each of the three front 120mm fans has a dust filter fitted that can be cleaned without having to disconnect the hard disks. You simply undo the eight thumb screws that are holding each of the caddies in place and slide the whole assembly forwards by half a centimetre; the filter can then be slid out.

The inside of the Antec Twelve Hundred has been sprayed black, making any system installed inside the case look good when viewed through the window. A lot of effort has also gone into making the Antec Twelve Hundred good for those who like neat cable work, with plenty of access points to run your cables behind the motherboard tray. This is hampered slightly by Antec's use of Molex plugs to power the fans instead of the usual three-pin header, but to the company's credit, every fan can be rpm-controlled by either switches on the rear or analogue rheostats on the front. Each of the fans also has three LEDs, illuminating both the interior and the front of the case in a pretty blue glow.

The Antec's front panel has USB ports, audio headers and even eSATA, though FireWire has, for some reason, been left out. While this won't be an issue for many, its omission is perplexing given the rest of the case's attention to detail – and that most of Antec's range (all of which are cheaper) has the connection present. Tool-less gizmos have also been kept to a minimum for the Twelve Hundred, with all fans, drives and add-in cards secured by either traditional or thumb screws. While this makes it slightly fiddlier to build, it does mean your hardware remains securely mounted even after transportation.

Overall, the Antec Twelve Hundred is a triumph. While its styling may not be everyone's cup of tea, the build quality, usability, cooling and value for money are outstandingly good. This makes it easily one of the best gaming cases money can buy.

Verdict

»Overall The Twelve Hundred may have brash boy-racer styling, but underneath is a sensible and well thought-out case. At just over £100, the Twelve Hundred is also competitively priced.

9

» Head-to-head The main features compared

Cooling

»The Antec Twelve Hundred usurps even the mighty Cooler Master Cosmos S when it comes to cooling ability. Dominating the top panel is a huge 200mm fan, while other exhausting duties are catered for by two 120mm fans on the rear. A further 120mm fan can be mounted to expel air from the video cards, while the case's front has no less than three 120mm intake fans – one in each hard disk caddy. This makes the Antec the perfect choice for cooling even the hottest setup, with the top-mounted oversized fan resulting in some of the lowest CPU temperatures we have ever seen.

Bays and features

»As with the Cosmos, Antec has gone for a flexible drive design for the Twelve Hundred's storage needs. Up to 12 5.25-inch drives are supported, though in its standard configuration, you are limited to three. With three hard drive caddies, a colossal nine hard disks can be accommodated, each of which will be extremely well-cooled by the front-mounted fans. In terms of features the Antec is decent, with USB, eSATA, headphone and microphone connectors. The Antec is the only case without a FireWire header, which although diminishing in importance, is still a feature some find indispensible.

With bags of interior space and a 120mm fan-mount on the side panel, the Antec Twelve Hundred is an excellent choice for owners of high-end dual-video card gaming PCs. It's also nice to show all that expensive hardware off

Although the Antec's bays are much nicer to use than the Cooler Master's, it still means you need to disconnect all of your drives just to install or remove a single disk. At least they are all well cooled!

HIPER OSIRIS

£85

Can Antec's huge flagship mix it with the all-aluminium competition?

Web Manufacturer: www.hipergroup.com Supplier: www.hipergroup.com

The Osiris is Hiper's second high-end computer case, with the large heat sink-adorned Anubis already impressing us in a previous issue. This model is considerably lighter than its stablemate, and is available in both silver or black depending on your preference. Next to the colossal Antec and Cooler Master cases, the Osiris's midi-tower layout is very compact, though fortunately the case is still roomy where it counts. There is plenty of space for high-end 10.5-inch video cards, and with five 5.25-inch bays and room for five hard disks, few will be left wanting more space. As with most modern PC cases, the Osiris has its PSU tray at the bottom rather than the top, leaving extra space for fans in the ceiling of the chassis. Hiper has used this space for two 120mm fans (one at the rear-top and one behind the CPU). There is also a 120mm intake fan at the front.

Hiper has employed quick-release side panels on the Osiris, which can be easily freed from the rest of the case by using two catches. This is a far easier system to use than the Cosmos's side panels, which we found a pain to realign once removed. The Osiris has a windowed side panel, but unlike the Antec, also had a fine mesh placed over it. This allows users to give the Osiris a subtle glow if they wish, while hiding any less-than-perfect cabling. Rather than using any fancy tool-less assemblies for fitting hardware, Hiper instead provides a huge bag of thumb screws, which we feel is a good compromise of stability and convenience. As with the Antec and Cooler Master designs, Hiper has decided to mount its hard drives in a removable caddy. Fine if you need to take all of your drives with you, but a pain if just adding or removing one.

Two stealth bezels are pre-fitted to the Osiris, which effectively hide your ugly optical drives from sight. The buttons of these bezels have been positioned in such a way that they should work with any drive, and we had no problem with any of the five DVD writers we found lying around the office. We really appreciate aesthetic touches like this, as the Lian Li, Antec and Cooler Master cases all look far less slick once hardware has actually been installed in them. Not so with the Hiper – what you see is what you get.

Although finding fault with the Hiper is difficult – especially at this amazing price – the lack of a dedicated cooling system for video cards will certainly concern some. While gamers using a single card – even a high-end one like a GTX280 or 4870X2 – need not worry, if using two or more cards sandwiched together in SLI or CrossFire, things would certainly get very toasty in the lower section of this case.

Overall, Hiper has achieved something very special with the Osiris – an extremely high-end finish at a price point the masses can still afford. Although it won't be right for everyone, this chassis is the perfect case for those that don't need a full-tower design and like classy, understated looks.

Verdict

»Overall It combines great build quality with an attractive price tag that shames some of the competition. If you don't need a full-tower case and a midi will do, you won't find a better one than this.

9

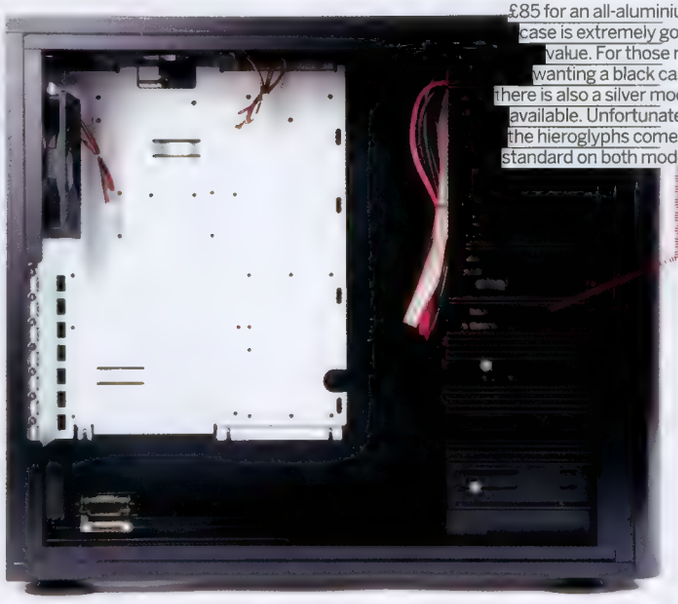
Head-to-head The main features compared

Cooling

»Compared to most cases, the Hiper Osiris is very well cooled indeed. In this illustrious company, however, it is the runt of the litter. Nevertheless, the three 120mm fans have been sensibly placed, with one at the top, one at the back and one at the front bringing in cool air. They will keep even the hottest single-card setup more than adequately cooled, but the lack of any dedicated cooling for the video card area makes it a less-than-perfect choice for SLI or CrossFire users.

Bays and features

»Hiper has fitted the Osiris with five 5.25-inch bays, two of which have extremely pretty aluminium stealth bezels fitted as standard. Four hard drives can also be fitted in the 3.5-inch bay caddy, though you could squeeze a fifth into the external 3.5-inch bay if you decided a floppy drive or card reader was superfluous to requirements. The Osiris's top function panel is one of the best we have seen, with FireWire, USB 2.0, audio headers and eSATA as standard.



£85 for an all-aluminium case is extremely good value. For those not wanting a black case, there is also a silver model available. Unfortunately, the hieroglyphs come as standard on both models

Tech specs Compare and contrast the specifications, technical information and verdicts

Contender and price	Fans	5.25-inch bays	3.5-inch bays	Construction Material	DESIGN	FEATURES	VALUE	OVERALL
£246 Lian Li TYR PC-x500	4 x 120mm	2	5	Aluminium	8 Although the Lian Li has an internal layout that pretty much borders on insanity, the aesthetics are undeniably beautiful.	8 The Lian Li has all the features you could want, with eSATA, FireWire, USB and audio headers. The cooling is also excellent.	4 This is a hugely expensive case, especially compared to its competitors, even when you take into account the quality.	7
£179 Cooler Master Cosmos RC-1100 S	3 x 120mm, 1 x 200mm	10	4	Aluminium and plastic	8 With mean, space-age looks, the Cosmos S is every inch a gamer's case. It's just a shame there's so much plastic.	10 You name it, the Cosmos has it, including a touch-sensitive power button and every connectivity and cooling feature in the book.	6 The recent price hike will have put the Cosmos RC-1100 S slightly out of the reach of quite a few PC users, which is a shame.	8
£105 Antec Twelve Hundred	5 x 120mm, 1 x 200mm	12	9	Steel	9 The Antec Twelve Hundred is certainly no beauty queen, but its internal layout is among the best out there.	9 The Twelve Hundred has a huge capacity for cooling, and also has USB, eSATA and audio. FireWire is unfortunately missing, though.	9 Although its not as cheap as some, the Antec Twelve Hundred still gives you a fair amount of case for the asking price.	9
£85 Hiper Osiris	3 x 120mm	5	5	Aluminium	9 The Hiper is not only tremendously pretty, but it also has exceptional build quality; rivalling even the Lian Li.	8 The Hiper has every feature on its front panel you could ask for, though the cooling is a little limited at 'just' three 120mm fans.	10 An all-aluminium case of this quality for £85 is nothing short of an absolute bargain. It really is outstanding value for money.	9

AND THE WINNER IS...

Antec Twelve Hundred

We had a very tough job picking a winner in this month's group test, as all of the cases here offer outstanding build quality as well as genuinely innovative design and features. Unfortunately, the Lian Li TYR PC-x500 and Cooler Master Cosmos S are probably going to be too expensive for most users, which made it a shoot-out between the Hiper Osiris and the Antec Twelve Hundred. In the end we decided the latter was more deserving, due to its exceptional cooling, incredible attention to detail and ability to accommodate even the most demanding of dual (or even triple) video card gaming machines.

TOTAL PCGaming GROUP TEST WINNER

Standout feature

Outstanding cooling

»With no less than six fans as standard and options to install a dedicated fan for video cards, the Antec Twelve Hundred is one of the most well-cooled cases we have ever seen. Better yet, all of them can be set to provide either high airflow or subdued operation by use of switches and dials on the exterior of the case. With a very well thought-out interior, it is also very easy to arrange the cables within the Antec to provide minimal impedance to the airflow.

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www.scan.co.uk

PC Specialist recommends Windows Vista™ Home Premium

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ASUS® Silent Knight II CPU Cooler
52 in 1 Memory Card Reader
Onboard 10/100/1000 Gigabit LAN port
Stylish Silver/Black Trident Case
Six USB Ports (2 Front / 4 Rear)
2 x 1394 Firewire Port Onboard
1 yr RTB Warranty incl Free Collect & Return

Phenom 4870X2

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4GB Corsair® Dominator 1066Mhz Memory
ASUS® M3A32-MVP Deluxe Motherboard
750GB Serial ATA Hard Drive (7,200rpm)
BluRay ROM + 16x Dual Layer DVD RW
2048MB Radeon HD 4870X2
Sound Blaster® X-Fi™ Xtreme Music
700W Super Quiet Quad Rail PSU
Quiet Triple Copper Heatpipe CPU Cooler
52 in 1 Memory Card Reader
Onboard 10/100/1000 Gigabit LAN port
Stylish Black Aluminium Trigon Case
Six USB Ports (2 Front / 4 Rear)
2 x 1394 Firewire Port Onboard
1 yr RTB Warranty incl Free Collect & Return

Apollo GTX

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INTEL® Core 2 Extreme QX9650 (4 x 3.00GHz)
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1024MB nVidia GeForce GTX280
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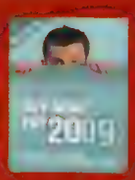


In three words **Solid. Fast. Pricey.**

ROCK XTREME 780 X9100

£2,275

Is this the fastest Centrino 2 laptop on the planet? Rock certainly thinks so...

Web Manufacturer www.rockdirect.com Supplier www.rockdirect.com

Pros Powerful performance and desktop-equivalent graphics

Cons Very large, very heavy and there's very little battery life

Although it might have passed you by, Rock actually bit the bullet a little while back only to be rescued by another company in a similar line of work. We've got a lot to thank Stone for (we know – you couldn't make it up), not only has it kept Rock's excellent range of laptops in the market where they belong, it has made sure the incredible Xtreme 780 made it off the drawing board.

The 780 is the follow-up to the popular (not to mention multi-award-winning) 770, which featured the T7800 (2.6GHz, 4MB Cache C2D), GeForce 7950 Go GTX 512MB and 2GB DDR2 RAM at entry-level, and the T9300 (2.5GHz, 6MB cache), GeForce 8800M 512MB and 4GB DDR2 RAM at the top-end.

With the 780, Rock has renewed the backbone of the system with a Centrino 2 core featuring support for the latest and greatest 45nm mobile processors and screamingly fast DDR3 RAM. At the entry-level end of the scale, the 780 retails for a shade over £1,500 and features the T9400 (2.5GHz, 6MB Cache), GeForce 9800M GT 512MB and 2GB of 1066MHz DDR3 memory. Clearly a great piece of kit for gamers as is, but the model we've been playing with is the fully kitted out version replete with a Blu-Ray ROM and DVD writer combo. At its core is an incredibly fast 3.06GHz Core 2 Extreme X9100 processor, 4GB of DDR3 1066MHz memory and a behemoth of a graphics chip – a top-of-the-range GeForce 9800M GTX complete with a whopping 1GB of dedicated DDR3 RAM. Finishing off what is one of the fastest gaming laptops we've ever played with is an impressive WUXGA+ X-glass display with a native resolution of 1920 x 1200 and a very useful HDMI output at the rear. The sheer power of the system coupled with Blu-Ray compatibility and a 40-inch HD screen would make it the ideal media centre, let alone a decent desktop replacement/mobile gaming PC.

While being borderline too big (not to mention hot) to actually put on your lap, the unit is comfortable to use, and the keyboard is tidily laid out with enough room for the number pad. Along with a fingerprint scanner for added security, Rock has ensured the touchpad has vertical and horizontal scroll capability to save unnecessary movement.

Our only real gripe with the system is that it comes in nearly the same price range as the Chillblast Genesis SLI laptop over the page. That and the fact that with such capable DX10 graphics on board we would expect the 64-bit version to be included as standard. We certainly wouldn't expect to have to pay an extra tenner to have the 64-bit version pre–installed either.

Russell Barnes

Tech specs

- **CPU** Core 2 Extreme X9100
- **GRAPHICS** Nvidia GeForce 9800M GTX
- **SCREEN** WUXGA+ X-glass screen
- **RAM** 4GB DDR3 1066MHz memory
- **HDDD** 320GB 7200rpm SATA HDD
- **OPTICAL DRIVE** Blu-Ray ROM and +/- DVD Writer
- **OS** Windows Vista Home Premium
- **WARRANTY** 3-year pan-European C&R parts and labour warranty

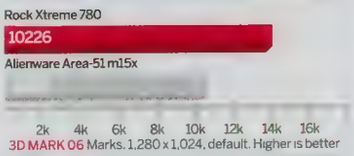
Standout feature

C2D

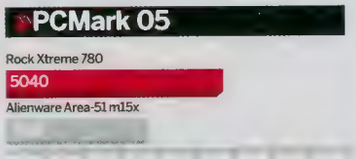
This particular model of the Rock Xtreme 780 features Intel's blazing fast X9100 dual-core CPU. While the Chillblast Genesis wins on cores, the faster clock speeds here will pay off in certain circumstances.

Benchmarks performance

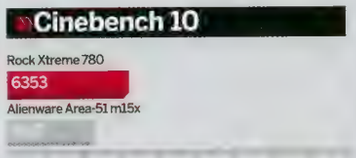
3DMark 06


Rock Xtreme 780
10226
Alienware Area-51 m15x
2k 4k 6k 8k 10k 12k 14k 16k
3D MARK 06 Marks. 1,280 x 1,024, default. Higher is better

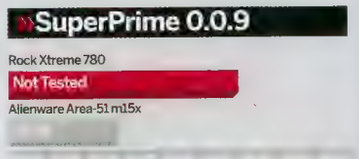
PCMark 05


Rock Xtreme 780
5040
Alienware Area-51 m15x
1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 7000 8000
PCMARK 05 Marks. Full test suite. Higher is better

Cinebench 10



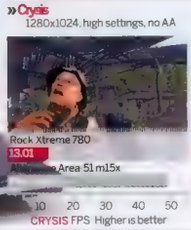
SuperPrime 0.0.9


Rock Xtreme 780
Not Tested
Alienware Area-51 m15x
5k 10k 15k 20k 25k 30k 35k 40k
SUPERPRIME 0.0.9 Seconds. 25m test. Lower is better

In-game performance playtested

Crysis

1280x1024, high settings, no AA



Company Of Heroes

1280 x 1024, high settings

Verdict

- **Performance** It's fast, with cutting-edge graphics and processing **9**
- **Design** It won't win any awards, but it's clean, sturdy and the screen is a joy to use **8**
- **Features** DX10 graphics and a 3GHz dual-core. It doesn't get much better on the move **9**
- **Value** The lower-end models represent better value, this one's pipped by Chillblast **6**
- **Overall** A fantastic laptop. Those that can't afford the fully upgraded model will get better value here though. **8**

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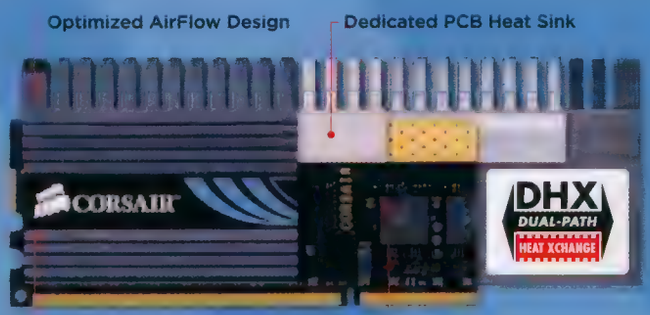

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In three words **Godlike. SLI. Notebook.**

CHILLBLAST GENESIS SLI

£2,499

Chillblast produces some of the fastest desktops on the market, but can the firm's portable offerings follow suit?

Web | Manufacturer www.chillblast.com Supplier www.chillblast.com

Pros | Utterly insane performance, beautiful quality, almost every possible feature

Cons | It's not exactly portable or cheap

To truly get the best out of modern PC games you need a powerful system, and a powerful system usually needs plenty of free space. While this won't be a problem if you are living the high life in a countryside castle, those of us cooped up in a city shoebox can expect a tough time justifying such a beast to the other half, be they real or imaginary. First of all you've got to squeeze in the box itself, and it'll need to be a big one if it's going to keep a decent GeForce card cool. Next, you'll need a monitor, which will measure at least 22 inches across if it's half decent. Add to this the keyboard, mouse and a 'phat' speaker setup and you've half-filled a small room. Unfortunately, if you are to get your daily fix of *Crysis*, there isn't much choice, right? Maybe now there is...

We've seen gaming notebooks that pack a hefty punch before, but nothing quite like the Chillblast Genesis. At the heart of this notebook beats a desktop quad-core Intel Q9550 processor, which is fed by 4GB of DDR2 memory and a striped RAID set of 7,200rpm hard disks. There is also a pseudo-surround sound speaker system and a 17-inch screen, with the icing on the cake being the video card setup, which consists of two GeForce 9800M GTX cards, each with 1GB of memory.

This gives the Genesis enough clout to run even the trickiest of games at a speed competitive with the fastest desktop systems. A frame rate of over 50fps in *Crysis* is a pleasure we rarely get to experience, but to see it on a notebook is nothing short of startling. Other less-demanding titles like *Far Cry 2* and *Fallout 3* also ran impressively, being perfectly smooth at the notebook's native resolution. This is no small feat when you consider the Genesis's X-glass display has a resolution of 1920 x 1200 – a level of detail normally reserved for 24-inch screens.

Elsewhere, Chillblast hasn't skimped on the all-important extras. You get a Blu-Ray optical drive, wireless LAN, Bluetooth and a built-in webcam. The keyboard is a full-sized model complete with a numerical pad, and the touchpad – though obviously not ideal for gaming – is massive. There's even a Freeview TV tuner complete with remote control, which makes the Genesis perfect for those wanting a complete media solution that can be shoved under the bed.

As notebooks go, there's no denying that the Genesis is huge. Weighing in at over five kilograms, there is no way you'll want to lug it to and from work every day, even if you have guns like Arnold Schwarzenegger at his 'roid-fuelled best. But that isn't really the point of this computer. It's a desktop replacement in every sense of the word, and in that vein the Genesis is undoubtedly a triumph.

Ian Jackson

Tech specs

- **CPU:** Intel Q9550 Core 2 Quad CPU 2.83GHz
- **RAM:** 4GB DDR2
- **GRAPHICS:** Dual GeForce 9800 GTX 1GB video cards in SLI
- **OPTICAL DRIVE:** Blu-Ray/DVD-RW
- **HD** Dual 320GB 7,200rpm hard disks in RAID 0 (640GB total)
- **WIRELESS** Bluetooth
- **SCREEN RESOLUTION:** 1920 x 1200
- **EXTRAS:** Webcam, microphone
- **TV:** Digital TV tuner

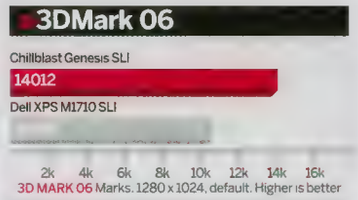
Standout feature

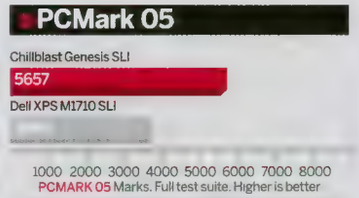
SLI

We have seen SLI notebooks before, but none with dual 9800M GTX video cards. This potent combination provides performance broadly equivalent to the fastest desktop PCs. 50fps in *Crysis*, anyone? Notebooks seem to have finally caught up.

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

Benchmarks performance


3DMark 06
Chillblast Genesis SLI
14012
Dell XPS M1710 SLI
2k 4k 6k 8k 10k 12k 14k 16k
3D MARK 06 Marks. 1280 x 1024, default. Higher is better


PCMark 05
Chillblast Genesis SLI
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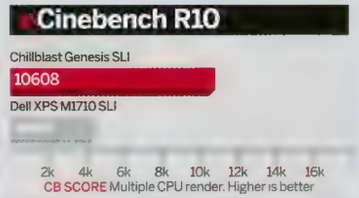
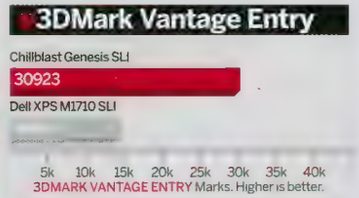
Dell XPS M1710 SLI
1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 7000 8000
PCMARK 05 Marks. Full test suite. Higher is better


Cinebench R10
Chillblast Genesis SLI
10608
Dell XPS M1710 SLI
2k 4k 6k 8k 10k 12k 14k 16k
CB SCORE Multiple CPU render. Higher is better


3DMark Vantage Entry
Chillblast Genesis SLI
30923
Dell XPS M1710 SLI
5k 10k 15k 20k 25k 30k 35k 40k
3DMARK VANTAGE ENTRY Marks. Higher is better.

In-game performance playtested

Verdict

Performance Totally and utterly insane performance for a notebook — 10

Design There's no avoiding the Genesis's massive size, but the build quality is excellent — 9

Features More features than you can shake a tree-sized stick at — 10

Value Desktop performance in a notebook doesn't come cheap — 7

Overall When Chillblast said 'desktop replacement', they weren't kidding. This is the fastest notebook we have ever seen. — 9

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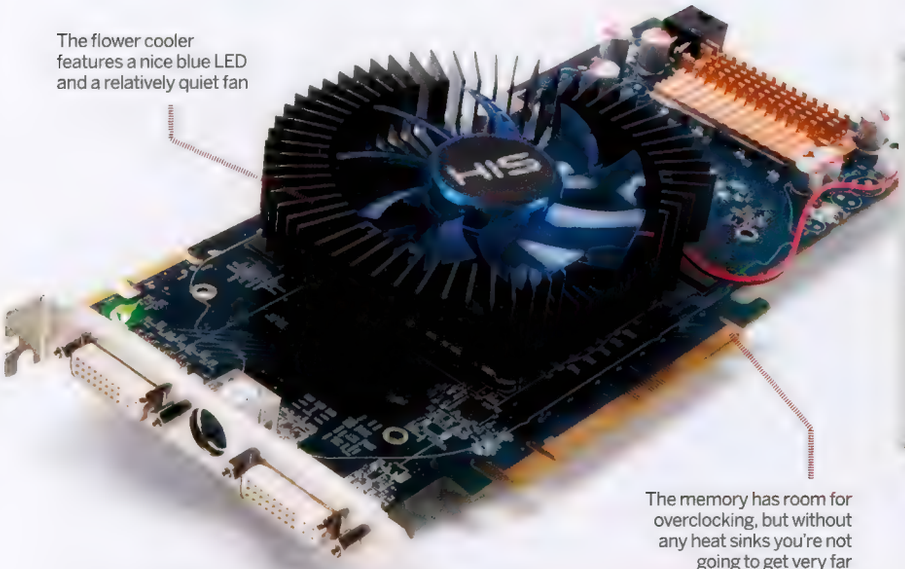
The flower cooler features a nice blue LED and a relatively quiet fan
The memory has room for overclocking, but without any heat sinks you're not going to get very far

In three words **Cheap. Powerful. Effective.**

HIS RADEON HD4830

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Web ▮ Manufacturer: www.hisdigital.com/un Supplier: www.hisdigital.com/un

ATI's latest offering from the popular HD4000 series sees the company plugging the gap between the high-end 4870 and 4850 cards with the lesser 4670. Until now, Nvidia has had this segment tied up in knots with the 9600GT and 9800GT (which is simply a rebadged 8800GT), so it's clear from the off the 4830 is designed to slot in and directly compete at this mid-range level. On the Nvidia side, the best price you'll see for a 9800GT is around £110, so straight away ATI has the advantage by around £20.

Before we go on to comparing the two on performance, however, it's probably an idea to see how the 4830 stacks up against its bigger sibling, the 4850, first. As many of you will already know, the 4850 is little more than an under-clocked 4870 – it still has all its 800 Stream Processors (SPs) intact. The 4830, on the other hand, doesn't just under-clock (575MHz core and 1800MHz memory from the 4850's 625MHz and 2000MHz), it also has one of the Stream Processor clusters disabled leaving it with 640 SPs. Next to a 4670 it's a veritable goliath, since it only boasts half as many SPs again and a puny 128-bit memory interface (compared to the 4830's 256-bit).

Standout feature

» The HIS cooling mount is a rather attractive and relatively quiet blue LED flower-cooler. Attractive as it is, it does take up a second slot in your case

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

In these respects, the 4830 deserves high acclaim – it has much more in common with the cards in the higher performance bracket than any other. This being the case, performance is very good. It wipes the floor with Nvidia's 9600GT and, for our money, trades places with the 9800GT as the mid-range graphics card of choice.

The fact that it's a full £20 cheaper and well inside the £100 price bracket means budget-conscious gamers have no excuse not to get the full DX10 trimmings this Christmas.

Russell Barnes

Verdict

ATI has found the perfect price and performance balance for the mid-range.

9

Tech specs

- » **Stream Processors:** 640
- » **Core clock:** 575MHz
- » **Memory:** 512MB (DDR3)
- » **Memory clock:** 1800MHz effective
- » **Memory interface:** 256-bit
- » **Manufacturing process:** 55nm

WOLF KING TROOPER MVP

£25

A simple and inexpensive mouse made to get you the perfect shot

Web ▮ Manufacturer: www.wolfkingusa.com

Tech specs

- » Rapid-fire button
- » Up to 2400dpi
- » 6.4 Megapixels/second

The number of features you can cram into a mouse is dwindling. We've seen everything from built-in motors to LCD displays, and more often than not these features end up being gimmicks. Gimmicks that don't sit well with gamers like us who put a lot of time, effort and money into finding the best gaming equipment.

So Wolf King went back to the basics with the Trooper MVP. This five-button mouse has a tall profile, sitting a few centimetres higher than most gaming mice. After a quick driver installation (we're not sure why it's necessary), the MVP is ready to play at either 800, 1600 or 2400dpi.

We're somewhat disappointed by the lack of dpi settings, especially with gaming mice typically going up to 3200dpi. But what's more troubling is the lack of customisation. The only available settings are 800, 1600 and 2400. If you're more of a 2000 or 1400dpi player, too bad.

What the MVP does have is a fast-firing control. This sends multiple signals of left button presses so you can control how many times you fire consecutively without holding down the left mouse button, up to a four-burst shot. Overall, the Trooper MVP delivers precision and comfort at a reasonable price, but lacks the versatility we've come to expect.

James Pikover

Verdict

The Trooper is very tall and restrictive, but as a budget mouse it's a solid choice.

8

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In three words **Very. Average. Monitor.**

With hundreds of competitors fighting for your hard-earned cash, can the Flatron W2271TC convince you to get out the credit card?

£219

LG FLATRON W2271TC

Web Manufacturer:www.lge.com
Supplier: www.lge.com

Pros A tiny footprint so it won't eat up precious desk space

Cons The menus are hard to navigate and the buttons are badly positioned

There are hundreds of monitors on the market at the moment, so it would stand to reason that manufacturers would be chomping at the bit to release units that not only offer great value for money, but products with great design and brilliant features. Sadly, in this case LG has missed the boat. The W2271TC isn't a terrible monitor, it's just not going to command any great share of the market. And it's a shame, because it does some things well.

To begin with, it comes well packaged and is extremely easy to put together. The stand is removable, and for some monitors it can take all sorts of twisting, pushing and pulling to get them assembled, but in this case it was as easy as sliding the base onto a neck piece and the neck piece on to the monitor. Easy.

Then the monitor lets itself down by only coming with a VGA lead. Surely the cost of adding in all the cables a monitor can use isn't really going to raise the overall price of the unit? Once you've located and attached the appropriate cables and the monitor springs to life, you are reminded why LG has such a good reputation in the monitor market. Colours are very clear and crisp, and the black bezel of the unit is thick enough to add depth to blacks and not so thin that the unit looks anaemic or structurally weak.

When trying to access the W22's controls life gets tough again. They're located on the base of the screen on the left-hand side, but are hard to intuitively feel for and you're not always sure which one you're pressing as you lift your eyes to see what's happening on the screen. Why monitor makers seem to leave the menu system and button placement as an afterthought is beyond us. If you are prepared to have white text running across the bottom of the monitor you may as well put the buttons there too, instead of directly below them on the base of the screen pointing downward.

Tech specs

- **MAX RESOLUTION** 1680 x 1050
- **RESPONSE TIME** 5ms
- **COLOURS** 16.7 million
- **CONTRAST RATIO** 1000:1
- **INPUTS** DVI-D with HDCP, VGA
- **WEIGHT** 4.5kg
- **STAND** Detachable
- **SPEAKERS** One-watt two-channel
- **EXTRAS** Built-in two-megapixel webcam

Standout feature

Footprint

» When all is said and done, this is still a light unit that looks good, is easy to assemble and doesn't eat up much desk space.

In terms of response the W22 is decent at five milliseconds, and as a gamer you won't have any complaints. The viewing angle is also good, so there are also no worries about any multiplayer woes. This monitor has built-in sound output, which is useful, but isn't powerful enough for you to get rid of your earphones or speaker sets. You also get a built-in webcam, which is a nice touch, but by no means a selling point. The W2271TC does have its merits, though, as it's good-looking, doesn't weigh a ton and handles graphics as well as can be expected. That said, the menus are poor, its not exactly cheap and you're probably better off leaving the credit card where it is and keeping your eyes peeled for something better. Overall, the Flatron W2271TV is a pretty average monitor for the money.

Jimmy Hayes

Verdict

- **Performance** LG has a great reputation and this doesn't disappoint — 7
- **Design** This is a good-looking monitor with a small footprint — 7
- **Features** It's not setting the world alight feature-wise — 6
- **Value** If you shopped around you could easily get more for your money — 6
- **Overall** An average monitor that would benefit from different button placement or a £70 price drop. — 6

A built-in webcam is a nice extra and the two-megapixel camera works well

The controls are hard to reach and the menus are tricky to navigate

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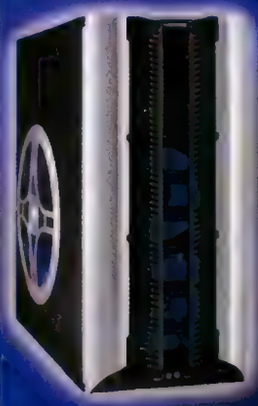

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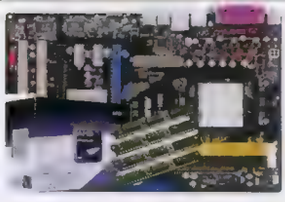

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In three words **Nvidia. Bites. Back.**

ZOTAC GTX260 AMP²!

With extra shading power and a much lower price tag, can this updated versiontake on the 4870?

Web Manufacturer: www.zotac.com Supplier: www.zotac.com

ATI has a lead in all three gaming card market segments at the moment, with its 4830 offering the best budget performance, the 4850 dominating the mid-range and the 4870 series offering the best performance for those with deeper pockets. Nvidia is never a firm to be left in second place for long, however, and we have seen the price of the GTX260 slashed in recent weeks. If you remember our video card shoot-out back in issue 10, the original GTX260 offered performance just below the Radeon 4870. By increasing the number of shader processors to 216, Nvidia is hoping this card will bring performance leadership in the all-important enthusiast market.

With increases over the original GTX260 of roughly 5 to 15 per cent, we are pleased to report that the Zotac GTX260 AMP²! is indeed faster than the Radeon 4870. Unfortunately, ATI now has 1GB versions of its own product, many of which have been factory overclocked by the company's partners. When compared to these cards, the GTX260 AMP²! doesn't fare quite as well, though there isn't much in it. *Crysis* zipped by at 32fps at Very High settings, while *Call Of Duty 4* and *Grid* were silky smooth at 88 and 67fps respectively. On ATI's card, the frame rates of these three titles were 28fps, 102fps and 83fps. All of these benchmarks were at the 1920 x 1200 resolution you get from a 24-inch monitor, so either card is certainly powerful enough to enjoy the most demanding of games at full detail.

Maybe 'GTX270' would have been a more sensible name for this product, but we are getting used to Nvidia's total disregard to logic when naming its new cards. Priced at £217, Zotac's GTX260 AMP²! costs almost the same as the 1GB 4870 cards. While ATI's product is generally faster across the spectrum of our benchmarks, there is no doubt that Nvidia's drivers remain the best in the business – and PhysX support is an added bonus that may become an important factor.

No matter which card you prefer, it's all good news for the consumer. Either card will be an excellent choice for both today and tomorrow's most demanding games.

Ian Jackson

Verdict

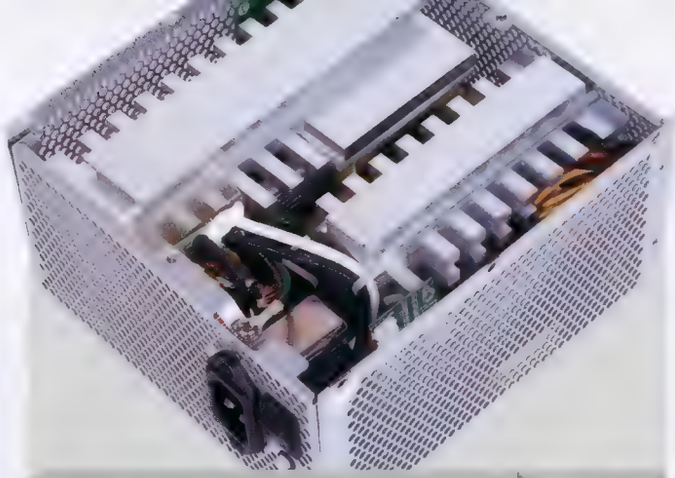
This new revision is a compelling alternative to the all-conquering Radeon 4870.

9

TOTAL PCGaming EDITOR'S CHOICE

Tech specs

- **SHADER PROCESSORS:** 216
- **MEMORY:** 896MB
- **POWER CONNECTORS:** 2x six-pin PCI-Express
- **CORE SPEED:** 650 MHz
- **MEMORY SPEED:** 2100 MHz
- **CONNECTORS:** Dual DVI with VGA and HDMI dongles



SILVERSTONE NIGHTJAR 450W PSU

Many quiet PSUs deceptively claim to be 'silent', but with no moving parts the Nightjar actually delivers

Web www.silverstonetech.com

Tech specs

- 450W output
- 35A 12V rail
- 22A 3.3V rail
- 15A 5V rail
- ATX 2.01 compliant

Silverstone already has a number of excellent PSU options for demanding gaming systems, but the Nightjar is a little different. While most PSUs have either dual 80mm or a single 120mm cooling fan, the Silverstone is entirely passive and has been specifically designed to be used in silent PC systems. Despite a modest 450W maximum output rating, the Nightjar has a very strong specification, offering a healthy 35A on the all-important 12V rail.

The rest of the spec is also excellent, with a full set of contemporary connectors including a 24-pin main power plug, eight and four-pin auxiliary connectors, two PCI Express power cables (one eight-pin, the other six) and six SATA power plugs. Older drives are also catered for by six Molex and two mini-Molex connectors. The Nightjar's aesthetics are simply gorgeous, with lovingly braided cables and a high quality extruded-aluminium casing. This casing acts as a giant heat sink, dissipating heat from the PSU without the need for any fans.

The PSU was surprisingly capable for a unit with such a modest rating, stably powering our GTX280-equipped test rig. It did get hot in the process, however, which is one of the limitations of this product. Silverstone doesn't recommend using the unit in cases that get hotter than 30 degrees Celsius, which rules out most gaming PCs unless you cool them with several case fans – cancelling out any noise advantage of a passive PSU.

While the Nightjar is an incredibly high-quality product, it's not really suitable for use in most gaming boxes, especially when 850W conventional supplies can be purchased for the same price. For low-heat media PCs, on the other hand, it's the cat's pyjamas.

Verdict

An outstandingly high-quality PSU, but not one that's suitable for gaming rigs.

7

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In three words **Bold. Blue. Chilling.**

EL DIABLO ADVANCE

Does Tagan's redesign of the El Diablo stand it in better stead?

Web Manufacturer: www.tagan.com Supplier: www.nanopoint.co.uk

Until recently, the El Diablo was Tagan's top selling case, and it still retails for around £75. It utilised a two-way cooling model that featured a mammoth 330mm side-panel fan and a massive 250mm front fan to take care of airflow. With the Advance, however, Tagan has added another two 120mm fans to the top of the case and topped things off with a front bezel temperature display and the addition of an eSATA port on their top-mounted I/O panel (complementing the standard USB 2.0, audio I/O and power button arrangement we'd usually find). If you're anything like us, you're probably wondering quite how loud this case is when it's up and running. It can be loud, but thankfully each of the three sets of fans have their own fan speed controller so manual adjustments can be made to find the perfect balance between airflow and, well, sanity.

There's also no shortage of space inside the case, which will prove useful for fans of extreme cooling (be it water or air). Those of you that like plenty of room for storage and optical drives will be in seventh heaven – it features five external 5.24-inch and eight internal 3.5-inch bays.

You certainly couldn't argue that the El Diablo isn't more advanced than its predecessor or more capable in the cooling department, but let's be honest – it is a rather acquired taste. We're not massive fans of the 'jet engine' bulbous-ness on the front panel, but we're sure there is no shortage of hardcore gamers out there that are. We also question the use of blue LEDs on a case that translates from its native Spanish as 'The Devil'. How hard would it have been to put a few red LED's in instead of the overused and rather tame blue? Still, quibbles aside, the El Diablo Advance utilises decent materials and there's never any doubt that the production values are high and the build quality is solid.

Russell Barnes

Standout feature

Big air

» The massive 330mm (yes, 33cm!) side-panel fan is capable of pushing cool air onto twin graphics cards and the CPU in one fell swoop.

Verdict

A case perfect for overclocked hardware. We're not massive fans of the aesthetic, though.

7

The El Diablo boasts a total of 12 internal drive bays, thank goodness the hard drive installation is practically tool-less!

The jet engine front fan does a great job of moving air, but it does nothing for its profile

We put Tagan's latest high-end PSU on test to see if the Super Rock is as solid as the name suggests

SUPER ROCK TG880-U33II

Tech spec

» **POWER OUTPUT** 880W
» 4x 12V rails (864w)
» 3.3V + 5V (180w)
» 12V + 5Vsb (26w)

Web Manufacturer: www.tagan.co.uk
Supplier: www.nanopoint.co.uk

Amazingly, the Super Rock TG880-U33II can provide 864W across its four 12V rails. It seems Tagan really wanted its enthusiast PSU to live up to its name, and it's pretty clear from the outset it does. It also regulates the power output to within 3 per cent of optimum as opposed to the usual 5 per cent, which means it sticks closer to the perfect output on its rails giving you a more consistent and stable supply of power.

The unit boasts two six-pin PCI-Express power connectors and a further two six-pin connectors with additional two-pin extensions for cards that require the extra kick. As such, it's a good choice for high-end rigs that make use of CrossFire or SLI and their quad counterparts.

With the aid of automatic fan speed control, the unit's 12cm fan only spins up when temperatures start to rise, keeping the noise down from its near-silent idle operating speed. While there is no shortage of other PSUs boasting the same capability, we're pleased to report that it works really well – certainly not as erratically as we've seen from other quarters.

Topping off what is otherwise an excellent PSU is that Tagan has been able to produce a solid and stable unit within standard PSU dimensions – usually these high-end models tend to be oversized, which causes problems with certain cases. Excellent.

Tech specs

» **DIMENSIONS** 585 x 250 x 625
» 330mm fan (side), 250mm fan (front) 2x120mm fans (top)
» Tool-less HDD rail installaton
» Front I/O: 2xUSB2.0, Audio I/O, 1x eSATA
» 3x fan speed control
» ATX, mATX compatible

Verdict

Barring the non-modular design, there's practically no way we can fault it.

9

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EL DIABLO
Advance
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ZALMAN CNPS 9300AT

£115

Honey I shrunk the CNPS-9500

Web ▮ Manufacturer: www.zalman.com
Supplier: www.quietpc.com

Zalman's coolers always look spectacular, and despite its diminutive size, the CNPS-9300AT is no exception. The build quality is also up to the manufacturer's usual high standards, with a polished base and plentiful high-quality copper fins. Zalman has employed the same mounting method for this cooler as it has for many years, with a plastic mounting frame that requires a backing plate to be fitted. This means you will have to take out your motherboard if fitting to an existing system, but once done the cooler can be installed in around five minutes.

The cooler's fan is powered by a four-pin VRM-enabled connector, which will enable modern motherboards to adjust the speed up and down as required. This is just as well, as at full power the CNPS-9300AT is annoyingly loud. Once subdued by a motherboard's rpm control, however, it operates at roughly the same volume as the stock Intel cooler. As you would hope, performance is better, though certainly not up to the same standards as tower-designs like the Thermalright Ultra-120 Extreme.

We can't really see where Zalman is going with this cooler. Its performance is not as good as its 9500 big brother, and despite being smaller, it is still much too tall to fit into most desktop-orientated media PC cases. It's reasonably quiet, but no better than the stock fan, ruling it out for silent PCs, and its prowess as an overclocking solution, though reasonable, is not a patch on the most powerful coolers we have tested.

Ian Jackson

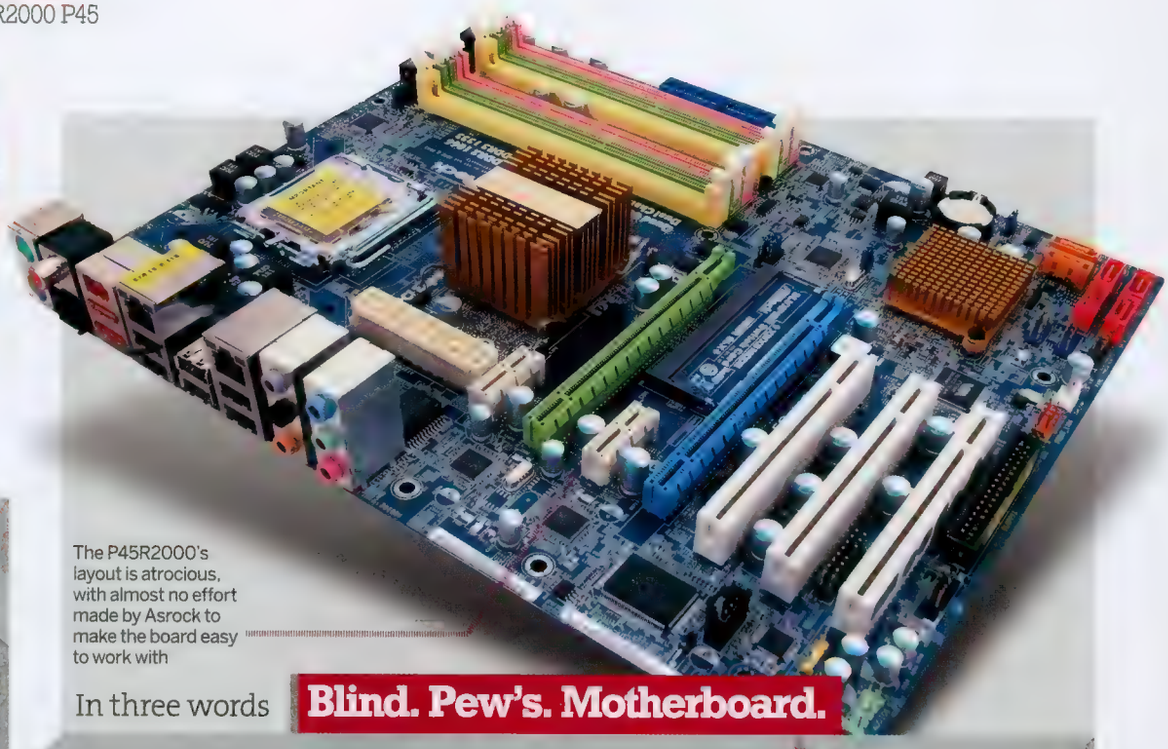
Verdict

We just can't think of any reason to pick this up when the CNPS-9500 is available.

5

Tech specs

- Socket 775 support
- Socket AM2 support
- Socket 939/940/754 support
- 100 per cent copper construction
- VRM-controlled fan



The P45R2000's layout is atrocious, with almost no effort made by Asrock to make the board easy to work with

In three words **Blind. Pew's. Motherboard.**

ASROCK P45R2000 P45

£75

A P45-based motherboard with all of these features for less than £80 is nothing short of incredible. But is it any good?

Web ▮ Manufacturer: www.asrock.com Supplier: www.ginger6.com

Tech specs

- **CHIPSET:** Intel P45
- **GRAPHIC:** CrossFire
- **SATA PORTS:** Eight
- **LAN:** Dual-gigabit
- **CONNECTIVITY:** 2x FireWire, 6x USB 2.0, 2x eSATA
- **MEMORY SUPPORT:** DDR2 or DDR3
- Overclocking support

Asrock has a great reputation for providing good value motherboards, but the P45R2000 has a set of features that puts many products costing twice as much to shame. The P45 has been our favourite Core 2 Duo platform for some time, with outstanding overclockability, superb performance and rock-solid reliability. We are used to paying a fair amount of cash for boards that feature it, with most costing at least £100. Somehow Asrock is able to offer this P45 board for just £75 including VAT.

Initial impressions are good, with Asrock providing a decent bundle, but the layout is a perfect example of how not to design a good motherboard. The power connectors are in the worst possible position (below and to the left of the CPU socket), the two CrossFire-compatible PCI-Express 16x slots are worryingly close to each other, and two of the SATA ports are inexplicably placed at the top-left hand corner of the board, next to the PS2 ports. To its credit, the Asrock does have a decent assortment of PCI expansion slots, and its ability to accept both DDR2 and DDR3 memory types makes it one of the most future-proof boards you can buy.

All of these problems would be easily forgivable if the board worked well, but unfortunately we had some issues here too. The FSB frequency when using our E8500 test chip was no less than five megahertz slower than it should have been, costing us around 50MHz, and performance was certainly lacking for a P45 solution. When it came to overclocking, we were thoroughly disappointed, with the P45R2000 failing to produce decent results even after we played with the board's FSB jumpers. Despite these shortcomings, it is impossible to overlook the high-end features Asrock has managed to include in this board. Dual-gigabit LAN ports are normally reserved for top-of-the-range Asus motherboards, while eSATA, FireWire and USB ports are also very welcome. Storage capacity is among the best we have seen with no fewer than eight internal and two external SATA ports, all of which support multiple RAID modes.

The P45R2000 is therefore a good choice for users on a budget that need all of this functionality, but those just wanting a fast, flexible board for gaming have far better choices available to them, even at this price.

Verdict

A P45 motherboard that's high on value but lacking when it comes to performance.

6

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In three words **Sweet. FPS. Design.**

£30

WOLF KING TIMBER WOLF

It's a full-size keyboard that uses a giant gaming pad, but does it work?

Web Manufacturer: www.coolermaster.com Supplier: www.coolermaster.com

The keyboard hasn't changed for longer than any of us remember. Since 1874, to be exact. So while gamers have long been used to the WASD setup for movement, the design of the keyboard is not designed for gamers. So why not change it?

This is what Wolf King thought when it designed the Timber Wolf keyboard, which has both the standard QWERTY keyboard and its own 40-key design on the left of the board. It's as large as most gaming keyboards (which is why Wolf King removed the number pad), and is made exactly with gaming in mind.

Using the gaming keypad takes no time to adjust to. It's designed around the WASD standard, and just curves all the 40 keys around it and your left hand. Nearly every key can be reached without moving your hand away from the centre, and an enlarged vertical spacebar and four other keys make the thumb more useful.

With no drivers, the Timber Wolf is a plug-and-play keyboard that just has duplicate keys for the gaming keypad. We like the no-software design, which is excellent for LAN parties or gamers on the move. Of course, this means that you can't have macro keys and, if you're someone who is used multiple keyboards, the settings for your games are going to be very odd and in need of constant changing.

Two USB ports in the back supplement the Timber Wolf, though they're only USB 1.1. It's already been eight years since 2.0's release, and anything that uses the 1.1 spec is laughable. We couldn't even find anything to plug into it.

What we didn't like is the cramped QWERTY keyboard, which isn't very comfortable to type on. Wolf King's Warrior Gamepad is the exact same thing, but without the full keyboard attached, which seems like a stronger design because we wouldn't type on the Timber Wolf. We find it difficult to want to use when Wolf King's greatest competitor is themselves, with a superior product for its purpose.

James Pikover

Standout feature

Gaming keypad

» The gaming side is an excellent reinvention of the keyboard for gamers. It doesn't look pretty, but it's easy to use without changing any settings.

Verdict

It's a good games keyboard, but a mediocre QWERTY board makes it gaming-only.

6

Tech specs

» Plug and play (no drivers required)
» 40 dedicated gaming keys
» Two USB 1.1 ports

The gaming keypad has enough keys for your left hand so you never have to look at the keyboard

The rest of the keyboard is a little cramped, and isn't ideal for regular use

£49.99

The ideal affordable power supply for mid-range gamers

SILVER POWER SP-SS500

Tech spec

» **POWER OUTPUT** 500W
» **CABLE CONFIG** Standard plus 6 SATA, 2 PCI-E
» **DIMENSIONS** 207 x 98 x 240 mm
» **MAX AMPS** 24a (+3.3V and +5V), 17a (+12v1+2)

Web Manufacturer: www.tagan.co.uk
Supplier: www.nanopoint.co.uk

You won't often see power supplies at the lower-end of the wattage spectrum in Total PC Gaming, since gaming gear requires a bit more juice than lesser models usually supply. For this reason we certainly wouldn't recommend any generic 500W supply (particularly ones that come pre-bundled with cases) even for a mid-range graphics card and dual/quad core-based system. They rarely live up to the promised capability and those naughty 'budget' or 'no name' manufacturers like to massage the numbers in any way possible to pull the wool over our eyes. The only way to avoid this is to cough up some 'proper' cash and go for a trusted and respected manufacturer – much like Tagen. Its SP-SS500 'Green Power' certainly isn't any old generic PSU, it's a solidly built unit aimed at mid-range gamers looking to power any CPU and graphics card they fancy up to around the GTX260/ATI 4870 region.

The 'Green Power' title means it's energy efficient and it uses very little power while on standby, and that certainly proved to be the case. The fact that 500W PSUs are considered to be low-end these days actually works in its favour, since it's much more likely the PSU would be utilising more than 50 per cent of its power under load – exactly where the sweet spot for power efficiency is.

Russell Barnes

Verdict

Highly recommended for power-conscious gamers on a tight budget.

8

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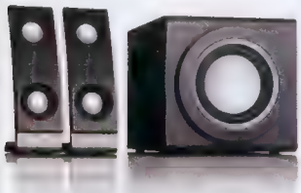

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OVERCLOCKED OR OVERPRICED?

LETTER OF THE MONTH

» While manufacturers sometimes cherry-pick high-clocking GPU's for some factory-overclocked packages, most are simply vanilla models tweaked via their bios

Q I have a new EVGA GTX280 and I was wondering something: EVGA sells them at stock speed (602MHz), but they also sell them at 621MHz (superclocked), 648MHz and 670MHz. Well, they actually go up to 691MHz, but that's water-cooled. They also give you the overclocking utility for free.

Is there any difference between the cards they sell, or are they just doing the same thing that I can do? I've been thinking about stepping it up, just for the sake of getting the most out of my equipment. If there's no difference between the cards, why not?

InsertAlias, Forum

Why not indeed. Manufacturers make a pretty penny out of factory-overclocking graphics cards for the enthusiast market, but assuming you've got the savvy (or issue 11's *Overclocker's Handbook*), there's nothing stopping you taking care of business yourself.

Feel free to use the provided overclocking utility to do the legwork, but test it thoroughly and keep a close eye on temperatures. You shouldn't be in any danger as long as you take it slow, but you'll have plenty of warning when you push things too far as graphical artefacts and tearing will start creeping into frame. Don't be taken for a monkey – be smart, get the vanilla model, do the work yourself and reap the lovely rewards.

BE WISE

Q I'm looking at getting a Be Quiet PSU. It's a luxury buy so it costs quite a bit more than you would expect. The 850W costs £135 and the 1000W costs £140. (I'm guessing that the 1000W isn't as popular and the stores still have stocks bought before the pound crashed against the dollar, while the 850W price reflects the prices post-crash). As it is only £5 more, is it worth getting the 1000W instead?

I'm only getting a Core 2 Quad Q9550 and a GTX280 (there will obviously be other stuff, like 4GB of RAM, but these are the two power sinks), so I can't see myself needing the extra power, but are there efficiencies or longevity benefits in getting a more powerful PSU?

Jezcentral, forum

We can see your quandary, Jez. It seems crazy not to get the 'best' money can buy. For the sake of an extra fiver, surely the high-spec model is worth a punt? Unfortunately, the answer isn't very clear-cut – a little yes and no. If you were looking to upgrade your system to allow for triple-SLI later on, then we would certainly recommend the higher-spec model, but if not, you'd do well to stick with the 850W version.

The key reason for this is efficiency. The 1000W model appears to be most efficient around the 60 per cent power load mark, but even with the high specs your rig boasts, you're not going to produce anywhere near enough load.

That said, both PSUs are definitely high quality and remarkably efficient at both ends of the load spectrum (though oddly not all that quiet). But we still have to side with the 850W model simply for the sake of our lovely environment thingy.

THE BIG SCREEN

Q I have a 17-inch monitor that only works up to 1024 resolution. It's time to get a new one as it's not really showing off my GTX280. I'm after something for a cheap price around about 22 inches. Any recommendations?

Darth Paul, forum

Our first recommendation would be to skip 22-inch widescreens entirely and head straight on up to the budget end of the 24-inch monitor market. You're absolutely right in saying that your 17-inch monitor is incapable of showing exactly what your shiny new GTX280 is capable of, but the same can be said of a 22-inch model (although to a lesser extent). If you really want to get your money's worth and show off what your pimped rig can do, 24-inch is definitely the way to go. We'd highly recommend that you look back to our massive 24-inch monitor group test from issue 14 for inspiration. Since it's clear you're on a budget, we'd suggest you go for Samsung's SM-2493HM, though cheaper models are available should that still be pushing it.

why compromise?

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Robert Krakoff never stops gaming, and to this day spends every evening online, kicking ass and taking names

The Real Razer

HOW RAZER IS SIMULTANEOUSLY MAKING GAMERS AND ITS COMPETITORS HAPPY, WHILE STILL MANAGING TO STAY IN BUSINESS...

When your company is at the forefront of the industry and releasing new and exciting products every year, life is good. What could make it better? Having that company be your passion, so when the alarm goes off every morning, you jump out of bed to go and do exactly what you want to do: create new technologies that constantly put our current limitations to the test. This is only a partial glimpse at the life of Robert Krakoff, better known to the world as Razerguy.

Mr. Krakoff, co-founder and president of Razer USA ltd, is not your typical gamer. The 68-year-old started Razer in 1998 after working as a marketing consultant for large companies like Hitachi and IBM, working on such products as the Thinkpad line. After a client created a patented technology, Krakoff saw the potential in it and asked for the rights. The owner didn't care to own it, and over the years similar cases led Krakoff to creating Razer, using these and new technologies. And raised on the Atari 2600 and PC gaming from its inception, Mr Krakoff saw something he liked, but also saw the flaws in it.

"The most important flaw in gaming at the time, according to Krakoff, was the poor interface"

The most important flaw in gaming at the time, according to Krakoff, was the poor interface, specifically the mouse that he says, at the time, hadn't changed significantly since its creation some 30 years ago. In the mid-Nineties, nearly every mouse available was a ball mouse with a dots per inch count of 200, 20 times less than today's most powerful mice (including Razer's own Lachesis). For gaming, using such a low setting on a screen (even at 1024 x 768) leads to lots of thrashing. "Since we had all been

Razer's newest product, the Megalodon, is a surround sound headset for enthusiasts. It's set for release in early 2009

gamers beginning in the late-Seventies," Krakoff points out, "we thought that gamers would most appreciate a better mouse. We built it and the rest was history."

It was then that Razer was born. It released its first product, the Boomslang, the first mouse that could read 1000dpi, and it also put Razer on the market. Shortly after, the company sponsored Jonathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel and began endorsing professional gamers worldwide. After a short dry spell at the turn of the century, Razer returned with the Viper, which at the time was a great technological feat.

"Optical mice competitors had not been able to develop a high dpi sensor as they were limited to 800dpi, so we introduced the Viper, which was actually 1143dpi. As soon as we released it, we began development of the Diamondback mouse, which sported many of the optical gaming-grade mouse advancements seen on ours and our competitors' mice even today."

The Viper's lead into the Diamondback gave Razer leverage in the industry to extend its reach. In 2006, Razer turned its one-peripheral

> "Since we had all been gamers beginning in the late-Seventies, we thought that gamers would most appreciate a better mouse. We built it and the rest was history"

model into a complete user interface business. The company released five new mice models and three completely new products: the Tarantula keyboard, Barracuda HP-1 gaming headphones and AC-1 soundcard. That same year Razer began collaborating with other companies through the 'Powered by Razer' program. "That was the year that made Razer from a market share standpoint. Because of the load of new products and the Powered by Razer initiatives with Microsoft, Belkin, Everglide and THX, Razer has grown to be a global maker of PC hardware. We can no longer hide below the competitive radar."

From a small startup in California, Razer grew to a 200+ employee workforce with offices in the US, South Korea, China and Europe. Its three-pronged snake logo is recognised worldwide, as is its pro-gaming sponsorships. Nearly 30 teams are sponsored from Amsterdam to Singapore, Beijing to Germany and Australia to the UK. Yet at the same time, Razer's new technologies and program to help other companies was, and is, boosting the competition. But it only helps gamers, according to Krakoff.

"I think that [the Powered by Razer initiative] is a good thing for the gamer. The better the competition, the better the products and the lower the prices. If we can help to get companies like Microsoft and Belkin back into the making of high-end gaming hardware then everyone should benefit. Big companies like these create more awareness of how important good gear is for hardcore and casual players and create a bigger playing field for gaming hardware in general."

Krakoff's business side doesn't see helping the opposition as a downside, but as good PR. Every product Razer helps create has its logo on every box of every product. Yet at the same time it keeps Razer's technology base ahead of the curve since it's always looking two steps ahead of the current-generation hardware specs. What better way than to help competitors. "Competition is a good thing, and when the heat of product awareness is turned up, only the best will survive. Marginal companies will fail and the gamers will become better educated regarding their choices and will seed out the weak competitors."

This plan of action follows a simple and far too true mentality for start-up technology companies, many of which begin in Southern California. Trying to hide new technologies from competitors is a waste of time, because eventually they'll find out one way or another. It's about having the tools to stay ahead of everyone else by six months that keeps you ahead and in business.

It's this model that Krakoff follows daily. Which is why every employee of Razer is a gamer. Only a gamer would know what they want in their user interface devices, so unlike other industries, everyone at Razer is making a product they want to use as much as the consumer. It's where the slogan 'For gamers. By gamers" came from.

But, like everyone else, it's easy to fall into a comfort zone and regurgitate the same products year in and year out. Krakoff had seen this far too often in the past; companies get lazy and decide to stop innovating and just stay in business. To keep his employees fresh, he looked at his company slogan.

"When we wrote the slogan 'For gamers. By gamers' we realised that in order to keep that promise alive we needed to surround ourselves with as many top pro gamers we can in all of our main offices. As a company that features innovation as our core competency, we recognised the need to keep fresh concepts coming in at every possible juncture. If a company only relies on internal innovation eventually you will dry up and lose contact with the customer."

This is, of course, only part of the reason Krakoff appreciates Razer. His passion for gaming (something employees are encouraged to do even at their San Diego headquarters) and joy of working with the gaming community is better than anything he's done in the past. "This is the best community or category of business in any walk of life ever in the annals of consumer products. Gamers are unique and special people and it has been a privilege to be a part of this community."

Razer portrays the best of technology companies; they aim for the best and settle for nothing less.

James Pikover

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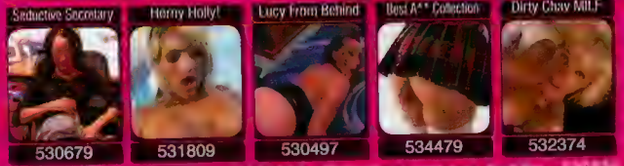

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Cartman - Respect My Authority	533210
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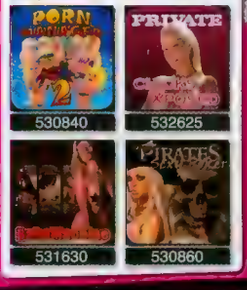

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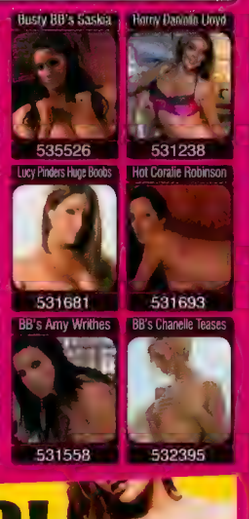

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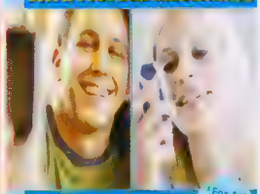

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ABE'S ODDYSEE

He may have looked odd, but alien Abe marked the comeback of the 2D platform game. Starring in Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee in 1997, this new character negotiated his way through an awe-inspiring mix of puzzles and action. David Crookes talks to the game's director Lorne Lanning

There are many great videogame characters. Sonic is a blue hedgehog, Mario is a simple plumber and Lara Croft is a sophisticated explorer.

Then there is Abe, the Mudokon star of Lorne Lanning's acclaimed *Oddworld* series of games.

"Abe was largely inspired by the plight of Third World labourers who have no voice and are being swept up by the expansion of globalisation," says Lorne. And instantly you begin to realise something is just a little bit different here.

Abe's Oddysee was the first game in the long-running *Oddworld* series, making its debut on the PlayStation at the tail end of 1997, having begun production in January 1995. As a 2D platformer, it came at a time when everything else was switching to 3D. *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil* had set benchmarks, and even Nintendo had switched cutesy Italian Mario to 3D.

Yet not only was *Oddworld* firmly entrenched in the second dimension, it was retro in another sense. Deciding against creating a scroller, the programmers opted for flick-screen eight-bit-style action instead. Yep, there was something not quite right about this game.

"We felt that 2D games had not been taken to their full potential," explains Lorne, who co-founded American developer Oddworld Inhabitants along with fellow special effects and computer animation expert Shelly McKenna. "Everyone was excited about real-time 3D, but I had been doing it for over a decade already, so real-time 3D on the PlayStation just looked crappy.

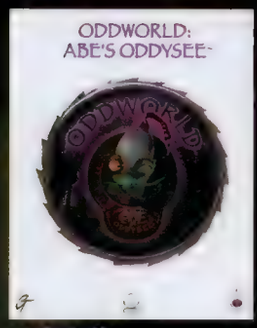
"We just felt we couldn't get the degree of smooth animation and rich environments if we developed a 3D game back then. So we decided to build all of our assets in 3D and then pre-render all of the bitmaps for the game.

"The game was 2.5D, but its image depth and detail gave it a richer look than what could have been achieved in real-time 3D at that time. We cared too much about the animation and image quality to launch our world. We didn't want to launch '*Low-Poly World* to establish the first impression of the *Oddworld* universe."

Oddworld was originally going to be called SoulStorm, but there were a few other games coming out with Soul in the title and it was felt it would lead to confusion. The name a lot of people liked was the name Lorne had devised for the company: Oddworld. Although Lorne didn't like having a company named the same as a property brand, he went along with it.

"The publisher GT Interactive acquired the publishing rights on 12 September 1996 and they loved the name Oddworld, so we felt that maybe Oddworld would cut through more as the name of the game," he said.

The game cast the player as a slave, working for the vast Rupture Farms food processing plant. Spending his days avoiding heartless beatings from the Slig guards while scrubbing floors and carrying out other menial tasks, Abe accidentally stumbled on a restricted area of the factory. He realised the Mudokons were not only being used as slave labour, but were also being processed into food. There was only one thing to do: get the hell out of there.



details
PUBLISHER: GT Interactive
DEVELOPER: Oddworld Inhabitants
RELEASED: September 1997
GENRE: Puzzle Platformer

GETTING DEEP

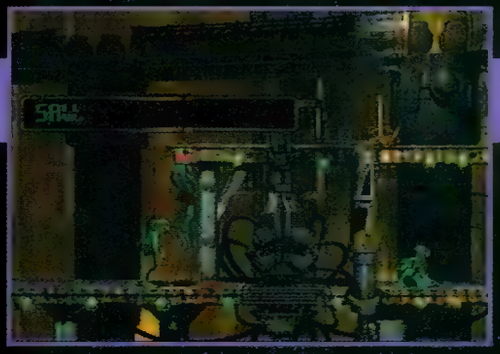
Oddworld had some major social and psychological messages behind it. So how does Lorne view the world?

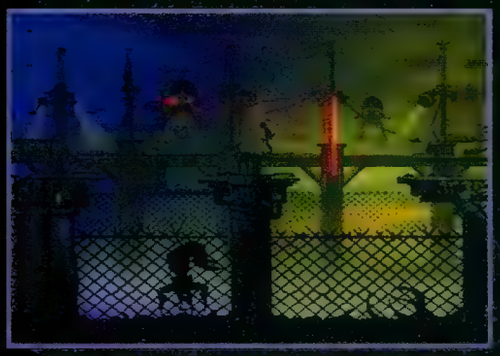
"*Oddworld* is about trying to sensitise people into having a greater interest and insight into how many global corporations operate and how the masses suffer the fallout without even knowing it.

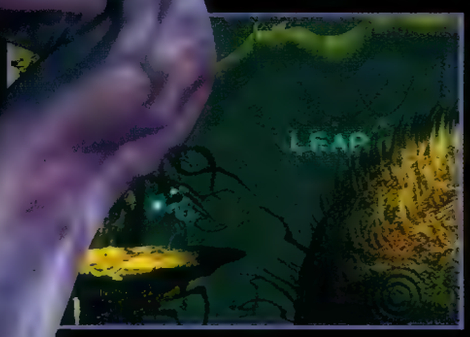
"As an artist, this is how I choose to reflect this perception after I learned about the dark side of how big business often operates and how deceptive it can be. "Occasionally people have said to me, 'you're just anti-corporate and anti-capitalist', which is actually far from the truth. What I am is anti-corruption and believe that unconscious and reckless capitalism is the downfall of everything that free people value.

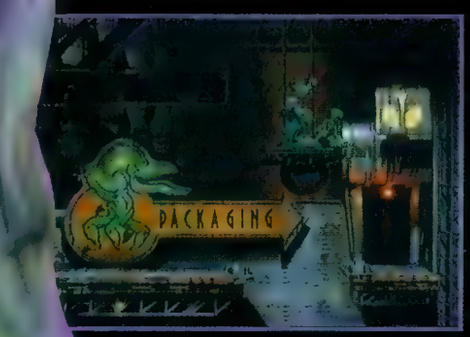
"In our modern landscape, the chasm between perception and reality is vast, and entertainment is one of the last frontiers for those with a conscience to actually make a difference and try to get people interested in the issues that are going to have tremendous impacts on their lives and the lives of their children.

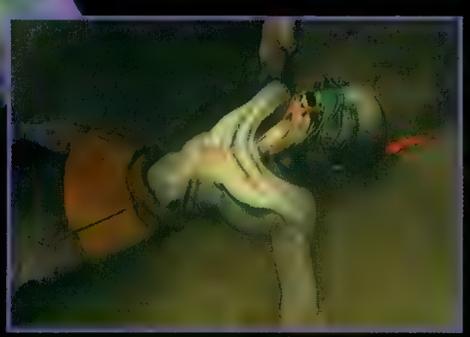
"Yet, I'm a capitalist, but I believe that the hope of our world is that we evolve into systems of 'conscious capitalism' and leave behind the archaic idea of winner rape all."











From this point on, the player guided Abe through a series of platforms, eventually discovering him to be the 'chosen one' – the Mudokon who could free the people from slavery and overthrow dictator Mulluck the Glukkon's regime. It was a game with a message, one that Lorne did not attempt to hide.

"Disturbing human rights abuses by powerful corporations are taking place across the world from the shipping docks of Bangladesh, to the diamond or gold mines in South America and South Africa," says Lorne, explaining his background to creating *Abe's Oddysee*.

"I've always been struck by the outlandish hypocrisy of the Corporate kleptocracy and the means used to promote their goods on an ignorant public. In the first world, the PR and advertising for these companies is always wholesome and good, while the reality of their systematic genocide of indigenous cultures and murderous practices escape public perception.

"It seemed appropriate for *Oddworld*'s corporate authority to be represented by happy faced corporate logos and career climbing, incompetent middle management."

Lorne's desire for Abe's plight to mirror that of people across the world meant the original backstory was changed. The game was going to start with Abe living off the land before being thrust into an industrialised factory slave environment. Instead, Lorne decided to place him straight in the factory.

"We wanted to give the gamer a similar perception that Abe would experience, so we started Abe in the mundane life of the typical daily grind, something that we could all relate to, then we have him discover a world that we too are far removed from – that of self-sustenance. Ideally, a story works best if it resonates with the listener, viewer or gamer. Starting Abe off in a familiar world would help us connect to his plight more quickly."

The game itself was inspired by titles such as *Out Of This World* and *Flashback*, which drew players in with their stories and realistic characters ("They made us feel like we were playing living characters as opposed to moving pieces of digital art around the screen," says Lorne).

He was also impressed by *Myth*, which showed that film-like production quality could be a draw in itself, and that led to *Oddworld*'s visually stunning landscape. Each one of the hundreds of screens with their pre-rendered backgrounds felt slick and polished, having had a huge degree of care and attention lavished on them.

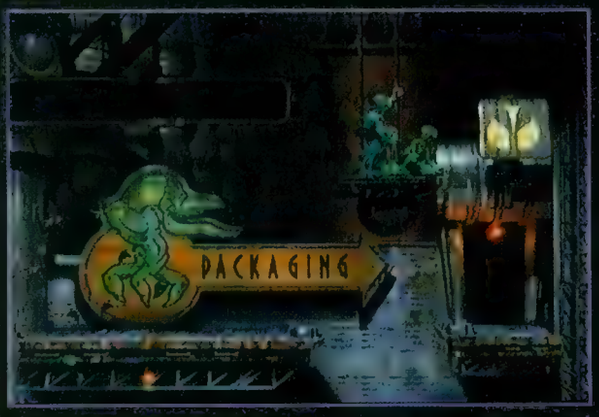
The beautifully animated, well-drawn characters also lent a charm all of their own, with Abe having hundreds of frames devoted to him. It allowed for an almost limitless number of movements and actions.

"We wanted to bring those lifelike characters, with relevant stories, into fully realised worlds that, if executed well, could sustain some degree of disbelief and wonder," says Lorne. This enabled him to kick-start his five-part story, which he called 'The Oddworld Quintology', with absolute perfection.

One of the most innovative aspects to *Oddworld*, however, was not the visuals, but the sound. Abe could communicate with other Mudokons. He could order: "Follow me" or "Stay here." Run him into a wall at full speed and he got up with a "Harrump." He could even fart and whistle.

"Gamespeak was one of the features I was most proud of," says Lorne. "We were creating audio from the very beginning because we needed to demo the game to continue to get a publishing deal and continue to keep investors excited.

ABE'S ODDYSEE



"Gamespeak was a critical component of gameplay and so were many hints and sound effects. We were looking for a tactile-sounding world that sounded more like an epic film soundtrack rather than a videogame. For me personally, I always consider audio to be 50 per cent of the image."

The cut-scenes in the games blended in seamlessly, with many running in and out of the action. "I was very proud of the seamless transitions from linear narrative movies to gameplay and back again," Lorne says. "And we also had incredible memory management taking place that reduced load times to almost nothing. We always wanted games to feel seamless as an experience and not be fractured by lazy engineering load times."

When creating *Oddworld*, the story came first. Lorne devised the plot, bouncing ideas off the crew and designer Paul O'Connor to work out what resonated or to see what could practically be changed in times of production crisis.

"It was conceived as a film story first, as were all of our games," Lorne explains, "because that's the way I write the story before we finish a design doc. If it works well as a linear story, then there's a good chance that the right ingredients are there for a good game story."

After the plot was drawn up, the characters were designed by Steve Olds. Lorne says: "We went through much iteration and continued to change the design until the look of the characters emoted the feelings that we wanted to communicate.

"The opening movie and the first level of the game were the first to be designed, because this game was going to need to be sold all the way through its production. So we needed to have a great demo that would communicate the special qualities of the game, but there were a number of new concepts in the play style, so we needed to make sure that the play built up quickly for investors to understand and believe in."

The decision to go with a flick-screen approach to the game was taken early in the development process. "Scrollers felt too gamey and bouncy for *Abe*," explains Lorne. "They felt more like cartoons or *Mario*, and not as serious as we wanted *Abe* to come across as. Flipping screens made the world feel more stable and it focused more attention on the lead character. This gave it a very different feel from scrollers and made it seem more like locked-off shots from a film."

By going for a serious message, Lorne understood the game was in danger of being perceived as too preachy or depressive. He had given birth to a character with more brain than brawn – whose main facet was 'empathy over aggression' – and he wanted Abe to live in a world that would mirror the dilemmas of our own.

But while that allowed for a story in which people could become engrossed, not just for the challenge, but for the story itself ("The story had to be more than just an excuse for gameplay, which is how I felt about many stories in games at that point in time," Lorne says), *Oddworld* could not become too overladen with politics.

After all, Lorne and his crew had envisioned Abe to be someone that would appeal to young and old and male and female alike.

He says, "Considering that the nature of our stories would be quite dark, it seemed necessary to offset the dark themes with humour that would continually remind the audience to not take us too seriously.

"We developed the idea for Oddworld Universe before we even started the company, and the concept was to have a world that was a cracked mirror of the disturbing practices and lone-man plights of our increasingly corporately governed and non-democratic world.

"While the concepts were relevant to today's global corporate theft of environmental resources and exploitation of indigenous peoples, nobody wants to hear a preachy or depressing story. So it had to be an endearing and captivating story regardless of the influences and the sensitivity that we were trying to bring to it."

One of the least fun aspects of *Oddworld*, however, was the save feature, criticised for forcing players to redo difficult sections over and over again since, when Abe died, he was placed right back at the start of a level. "We blew the save feature on that one," admits Lorne. "We were trying to fix it up till the very end, but we just didn't have the time and the save code was pretty lame. We did fix it perfectly for *Abe's Exoddus*, which was released one year later. So we tried to make up for it."

Yet one thing that worked incredibly well was the Aware Lifeforms In Virtual Environments system (or ALIVE for short). This Artificial Intelligence routine cleverly controlled the actions of the creatures in the game according to the situation they were faced with and the type of character they were. It also meant that Abe could decide which puzzles to solve and which ones to ignore. The player could even trick Sligs into shooting each other.

"ALIVE was really a philosophy about how we wanted characters in games to behave, and what we wanted gaming experiences to feel like," says Lorne. "The achievements were largely in the creative solutions, while every step of the technology was an ongoing struggle."

Abe's Oddysee was released on 19 September 1997 for the PlayStation and PC on what was called Odd Friday. It went on to achieve huge critical acclaim and the sequel, *Abe's Exoddus*, followed a year later.

It came as little surprise to Lorne, "When you invest so much time and money into a project, you better believe it's going to do well or you'll never get the funding in the first place."

So does he, as some people believe, think *Abe's Oddysee* is the best ever 2D platformer? "It's flattering to hear some people think that. I don't know how I would have felt about the game if I just played it without having built it with the team, but statements like that are ultimately for the audience to decide as it's a claim we would never make. There have been some truly great 2D games."

* Following a host of other *Oddworld* releases including *Oddworld Adventures* on the Game Boy in 1998, *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee* for the Xbox in 2001 and *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* for the Xbox in 2005, Lorne Lanning decided, in March 2005, to shut down his development facility in San Luis Obispo, America. A couple of weeks later, a note was placed on the *Oddworld* website saying the series was taking a bit of a sabbatical.

Since then, Lorne has unveiled a deal to team up with Vanguard Animation to develop *Citizen Siege*, an original CG animated feature, revolving around an ex-patriot who finds himself ensnared in a nightmarish credit racket that leaves him 'repossessed' in a new universe where current global conditions are extrapolated into a frightening near future in which democracy has all but disintegrated under the rule of global corporatism. Sound familiar?

DON'T SHOOT!

Killing the enemy in *Abe's Oddysee* was not carried out in the usual shoot-and-move-on manner used in many previous platform games.

Instead, Abe could chant and take over – or possess – other characters, using them to solve puzzles or carry out a killing.

But why was Abe not allowed a gun himself?

"We refused to allow Abe carry a gun," says Lorne. "We did not want to see him represented in this way. But at the same time, I insisted that there be shooting in the game so we had a big problem to solve.

"We had to conceive of a way that the gamer could have some great shoot-outs without actually having Abe be the vehicle for destruction. Normally, a player acquires a gun and that becomes the primary problem-solving device, but we didn't want that.

"So we thought of ways of allowing Abe to acquire guns for short bursts, but not be disappointed when they couldn't be taken with him. Our solution also needed to be something that was core to his indigenous origins and the mystical ways of his ancestors.

"Ultimately, we figured out the possession play mechanic where Abe could take over a gun-toting character for a short spell. It solved the problem without compromising the rules of his character."

This decision to make Abe peaceful also dictated the way the puzzles were created.

"It was basically a creative process and we wanted all of the puzzles and enemies to be relative to the story and condition of the world. We also wanted to twist the idea of rescuing as a priority over killing, so the idea that you had to lead characters through hazards to save them was to create a tension that made you feel more responsible for those you were supposed to save.

"This was not a common play pattern, and so we wanted to explore the feeling of tension when you're taking responsibility for others in a dangerous and hostile environment. We also wanted your mishaps to be funny, albeit a bit sick and twisted."

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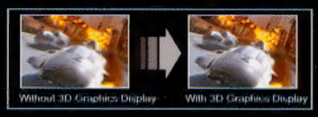

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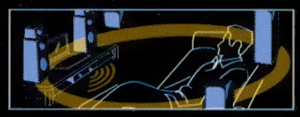

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